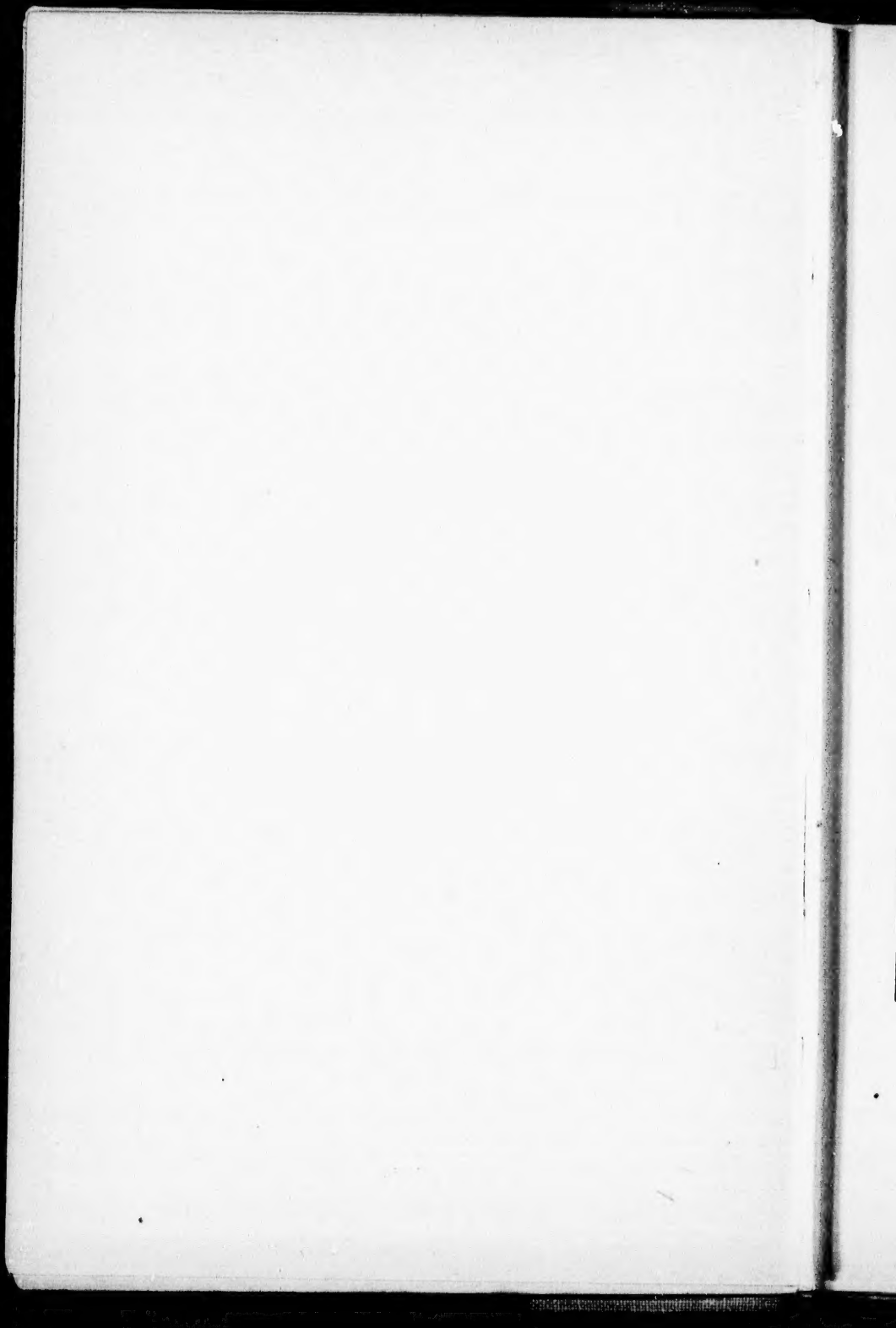


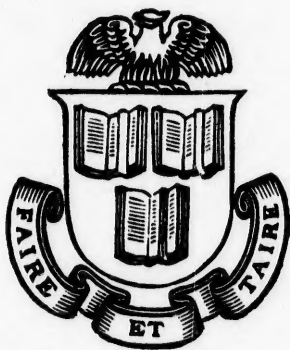


**Little Lords of
Creation**



Little Lords of Creation

By
H. A. KEAYS



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TO
C. H. K.

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CHAPTER I

It was a boy.

And really, after he was once there, it seemed impossible that they could ever have faced the prospect of his being anything else. That surprised them a good deal when they came to think of it seriously. For by the time he was an hour and twenty-five minutes old, they were fully alive to the fact that he might have been a girl. And that would have been—well, different. It was wonderful what a narrow escape they had had. And they were his parents. That was the most extraordinary thing about it all.

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There was suddenly a new and exquisite dignity in themselves of which they had never dreamed before. Years of feeling separated them from the yesterday when there was no link between themselves and posterity.

By the time the baby had owned them for two hours, they had developed a profound pity, which was perilously like contempt, for all the unhappy beings who had no babies.

To be sure, in their secret hearts they were a good deal surprised at his looks, for he certainly was not the infant Adonis they had every right to expect their child to be. Any man caught loose on the streets with such a complexion would undoubtedly have been considered "beery." And he had discovered how to make the most frightful faces. His mother grew quite anxious about it. At last she plucked up courage to say cautiously to her

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husband, "Do they all look like that, Douglas?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," replied the young man, thoughtfully. "I never saw them before."

"Well, I don't think it will do to let him keep on wrinkling up his face like that. A tendency is almost certain to develop into a fixed habit unless it is checked in time, you know, Douglas."

"I should think it might be due to the unaccustomed action of the air on his skin," said Mr. Bell. "He'll probably conquer that himself. But we can ask Mrs. Coddle about his looks."

"Like most other babies? Well, I should say not!" declared Mrs. Coddle, with an emphasis which terrified her innocent hearers; and then, quite unaware of the effect she was creating, the good woman paused long enough

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to stick nearly a whole paper of safety-pins all over the baby before she went on.

"He's just about as much like 'em, I should say, as chalk's like cheese."

She meant to say a good deal more, but the baby, who had not yet recovered from his surprise and delight at finding himself the owner of a voice, began to exercise it powerfully.

"There now! Just listen to them bellus!" said Mrs. Coddle, enthusiastically, between the gusts.

But after Mrs. Bell had listened to them for an hour or two, she sent to the study for her husband, who had been snatching a nap there and dreaming that ten thousand bands were playing the same tune over his grave, each in a different key.

"What do you think about it, Douglas?" she asked, tearfully.

"Perhaps he's hungry!" exclaimed

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his father, brilliantly, after some moments of serious thought.

"Oh, no! He really isn't," said Mrs. Bell, earnestly. "He won't be hungry—let me see—for eleven minutes yet. All the books insist you must not feed him too often. You know we must begin right with him, Douglas. All his future life depends on the training we give him now. No, don't rock him or hush him, Mrs. Coddle. Why, one book says the smallest babe is so sensitive to the power of mind and environment, that he acts just as the people about him make him act."

"Fiddlesticks!" remarked Mrs. Coddle, cheerfully. "I'll warrant the person that wrote that never lived under the same roof with a live boy, or he'd never have called him a babe. A boy ain't a babe, nor yet some girls."

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About noon, Deacon Creak, driving back to his farm from town, stopped to consult his pastor about some church matters. As he was leaving, he remarked mildly:

"Child cries some."

"Some!" exclaimed Mr. Bell.

That remark rankled in his mind after the deacon was gone. It seemed to imply that a child could cry more. It opened up fearful vistas of possibility.

It was winter, and the house had double windows, but that did not prevent the nearest neighbor, who lived half a block away, from coming in some hours later, to say that she'd "like to see the child she couldn't quiet."

She went away after a while, though, with every symptom of nervous prostration, but before she went she remembered to say: "I wouldn't let

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him cry like that if I were you. He'll injure himself."

Then Mr. Bell went for the doctor. It was growing dark and stormy, and the old gentleman was quite unwilling to go out just because a boy cried, but Mr. Bell put the case to him strongly. This was all the more trying, for when they reached the house, a mile and a half away, Mrs. Coddle met them at the door with her finger on her lip.

"He's just this minute fallen asleep," she whispered, reassuringly; "but I think you'd better leave something to quiet Mrs. Bell's nerves, Doctor."

After this, whenever they sent for him, which was sometimes once and sometimes two or three times a day, the doctor was always either out or just going out to a farm ten miles west of town, or else he couldn't go

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out at all on account of an imminent case right in the neighborhood, or he had just gone to bed with a frightful chill. But, as may be inferred, he was a resourceful man, and a sleeping-partner in the drugstore, and he always had something to recommend, something that would certainly cure the baby now, if they didn't overfeed him.

"But I just suppose you keep him stuffed full all the time," he remarked, tartly, to Mr. Bell. "I warrant you, the chap hasn't got room to turn but what the cork comes out."

"But it's only milk," remonstrated Mr. Bell.

"Only milk!" The doctor glared at him. Then he looked solemn.

"I tell you, my good sir, milk's quite dangerous enough for a boy that was born with an undeveloped stomach."

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"An undeveloped stomach! I don't believe it," retorted Mr. Bell, hotly. "Mrs. Coddle says he's the finest boy she ever saw."

"Oh, of course. But it's true, what I say, just the same. Go home and think about it." There was a twinkle in the doctor's eye, but Mr. Bell was too much wrought up now to see such a little thing as that.

He hurried home to Mrs. Bell, and broke it to her gently.

It seemed to them both a fearful thing, and they spent hours indignantly repelling the suggestion, until Mrs. Bell exclaimed, triumphantly:

"Why, it just can't be true, Douglas. Of course it can't. Why, if it was, he never could cry like he does."

Mr. Bell looked a little as if he failed to grasp the point.

"Don't you see, dear?" continued his wife, urgently. "Those deep, low

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notes in his voice—he must have plenty of—of stomach to do them, I'm sure."

"You dear Betty!" said her husband, tenderly; and there the matter dropped, for the baby inadvertently fell asleep, though it was only 2 A.M., and his parents actually forgot what they had been staying awake for.

By this time their house resembled a drugstore. They had never intended their child to be corrupted by medicine, believing firmly that Nature was the great physician, but in moments of frenzy they flew in the face of theory. They started out, or rather in, with lime-water. Then they tried catnip, and peppermint, and aniseed, and steeped caraway-seeds. They began with the remedies singly; then they took them in groups, and there were even fearful moments when they emptied them all into him at once.

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They rolled him up in compresses until he was as tight and hollow as a drum. But he escaped with his life, and—his lungs. Then they undid him, and sat him in hot water up to his chin, while they poured a pint of it down his throat.

And still he wept, real tears, which mingled with the flood within and without.

Then finally, in a fit of utter desperation, they threw their morals to the winds, and varnished him inside, and massaged him outside, with—whisky.

"It does seem to me," said Mr. Bell, rather doubtfully, "that an unsuspecting person might think we were trying to murder him."

"But, Douglas, a normal baby never cries. They just sleep and eat. He's abnormal, and something's got to be done about it."

"Yes, I dare say. But I've really

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wondered sometimes whether he wouldn't get more comfort out of his crying, if we didn't interfere with it quite so much."

Yet, after all, he didn't cry all the time there was. There were moments in his loud existence when he forgot his lungs—moments of mutual ecstasy for his parents, when he was simply adorable, and "goo'd" and "gaa'd" enchantingly, and smiled—oh, yes! really smiled—right at his mother.

They never referred now to the time when they had thought him—well, not exactly handsome. He had such lovely blue-gray eyes, and his nose had been Roman from the start, anyway. He was the only baby like himself in town, and they felt truly sorry for all the other people whose babies had pug noses, wobbly eyes, and a general air of mental vacancy.

"Just listen, Douglas!" exclaimed

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Mrs. Bell one evening about ten o'clock, when her husband came in from prayer-meeting. "It's really remarkable. I feel sure he's going to talk very young. You'd just think he'd been practicing vowel sounds the whole evening."

They went in, and worshiped at his shrine becomingly; but in the chill night watches when prolonged and vigorous exercise is apt to pall upon the frame, Mr. Bell said, in a tone which bordered on irreverence:

"I must say, Betty, I think he's kind of overdoing this thing. I wish he'd give the vowels and me a rest, or at any rate, tune up on the consonants for a change."

But, of course, the baby, who no doubt felt himself charged with the training and development of these two very young people, kept up the game, from pure love of the sport apparently,

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until it was nearly breakfast-time, when he refreshed himself with a brief but hearty nap. And then he began again.

"You see, dear, it's—like this," said Mrs. Bell, cleverly getting in a little rush of words whenever there was a momentary gap in the volume of sound on her lap. "Our child has evidently got a—very intense na—ture that's how he can get along with so little—sleep, for—for whenever he does slee—p he sleeps all o—ver, you know, just like a per—fect human being should; he throws his whole na—ture into whatever he's doing."

"I wouldn't mind that, Betty, if he didn't insist upon throwing mine in, too," said Mr. Bell, gloomily. And then they both laughed, which was a mistake, for the baby interpreted it as a rivalry of his efforts, and strengthened his note accordingly.

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By nature and training Mrs. Bell was both religious and clean, but after the advent of this boy with his vocal outfit she hardly ever got a chance to say more than half a prayer at a time, or to take more than a third of a bath at a sitting, for against godliness and cleanliness the baby had equally strong conscientious scruples, it seemed.

"I'm sure it must be weeks since I washed my left foot," she sighed in despair at last. "I always forget and begin with my right, and he seems to know by instinct just when I've finished it. You'd think he was dying."

Before her marriage Mrs. Bell had been an adept in all the wisdom of the moderns on the subject of "child culture." She was confident then that she had an exact formula for the development of their little angel-seed souls into beatific efflorescence. She had written an article entitled "A

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Little Child Shall Lead Them," which had been widely commented upon, with unanimous praise for its remarkable insight into the "child spirit." She remembered it sometimes now, but without joy, for her actual experience with a child in the raw concrete had led her to some conclusions of which the article in question had been strikingly innocent. Oh, yes! her little Laurie "led" them, but certainly not along the route she had in mind when her facile pen sketched so glowingly the spiritual heights up which rushed the teacher and the parent in the train of the pedagogical child.

Still, perhaps, it was just as well that she had gained glory by writing it when she was sure she knew all about it; she would never be in a position to dogmatize again.

Undoubtedly, if the Bells could have planned it, there would have

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been a calmer, a less vociferating infancy for the race. They were sometimes driven to compare babies and kittens in a way which would have gratified the kittens and grieved the baby, if he could have heard them, which was quite impossible in the din behind which he protected himself.

It was in the shrieking watches of the night that Mrs. Bell first began to be haunted by the awful thought of heredity.

"I suppose you don't know anything about having a criminal on your side of the family, Douglas?" she ventured timidly, at last.

"A criminal, Betty! What in mischief do you mean?" demanded the astonished young minister.

"Oh, I don't know, I'm sure!" she sobbed hysterically; "but it seems as if there must be something to account for all—for all—this, Douglas. I've

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written to Aunt Lucinda to look up my side of the family, and I couldn't help wondering about yours. You see, dear, there aren't any babies like ours in the books, and everybody who comes here says their children never cried unless they had pins sticking into them, and that they never had to be up with them at night. I wouldn't dare tell that we're up every night nearly all night with baby."

"Hah! Then I guess Mrs. Puffit's baby must have been stuck jam-full of pins the day I called there. I had to talk to her in pantomime, because of her angelic youngster's solid and everlasting and forward-and-back-action yell."

Mrs. Bell looked thoughtful. "That's so," she said, more cheerfully. "Yet when that woman was here last week, she said her offspring never wept, because they all inherited such beautiful dispositions."

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"Yes, I'm sure they do!" retorted Mr. Bell, in a fiercely negative tone. "You've only got to know Papa and Mamma Puffit well to be sure of the mild accuracy of that statement. But I tell you, Betty, I'm proud to own my boy, bawl and all."

But one morning soon after this they thought the end of "bawl and all" had certainly come. About six o'clock Mrs. Bell took the baby out of the crib, which, of course, he always occupied theoretically, and brought him in with her. He became at once so strangely, sweetly silent that she fell into a blessed sleep, from which she was suddenly awakened by a sense of vacancy beside her and a soft thud on the floor.

"Douglas," she gasped, in a voice almost paralyzed by terror, "he's gone! Get him!"

"Where?" shouted Mr. Bell, excit-

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edly. "Get the landing-net, Betty. Get the landing-net—quick!"

For he had just been dreaming that he had caught a black bass so large that it had to be anchored fore and aft, from one side of the lake to the other. Naturally, at Mrs. Bell's scream he concluded the bass had escaped from its moorings.

"No, no, the baby!" wailed Mrs. Bell, burying her head in the bed-clothes. She knew he was dead by this time.

Mr. Bell sprang up. But when he reached, at a bound, the other side of the bed, there was no baby there.

"Oh, Betty!" he murmured, with a prescient groan, as he vainly tried to brace himself for what must be.

But lo! at that moment there issued from beneath the bed a gurgling "vowel-sound," and looking there he beheld the baby peacefully reposing

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on his spine, and gazing with apparent ecstasy at the shining springs above him.

After this they concluded that he was not as perishable an article as they had supposed, and Mr. Bell encountered a certain difficulty in refusing to hold the darling, on the plea that he was feeling "nervous," and would be sure to let him fall and break.

The Bells had only been settled in Sand Harbor about a month before the baby made their acquaintance, and naturally enough the people of the little town were very much interested in their new pastor and his wife, and everything that was his, and soon the baby furnished a phenomenal theme for the sewing society, and gossip about his antics even bulged out at the missionary meeting in elusive whispers.

Then the sisters began to call on

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Mrs. Bell, singly and in squads, and they brought their advice with them. Mrs. Netley was sure he was teething. Why, her second cousin's sister-in-law had a baby who was born with a tooth. From that fact it was perfectly rational to deduce the theory that Baby Bell was cutting his now. But on the other hand, Mrs. Pringle was certain it was not his teeth at all.

"That kind always cries till the day they're three months old. It's a waste of time and money trying to stop 'em. You just wait. The day he's three months old he'll shut up tight's if he was corked. That's if he lives, of course. Some can't keep it up that long."

"Oh, no! It isn't his age. I know exactly what's the matter with your poor precious," sighed Mrs. De Lent. "It's his little nerves, Mrs. Bell. Neurasthenia, that's it. Neurasthe-

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nia." Her tongue tenderly caressed the word. She was very proud of it. She wondered if Mrs. Bell had ever heard it before.

"I suppose you've never suffered from neurasthenia, Mrs. Bell?"

"No," said Mrs. Bell, very shortly.

"Now really! Well, my doctor said it only attacked the most sensitive, high-strung natures. But I dare say your dear baby inherits his predisposition to it from his father. I just admire Mr. Bell, you know, Mrs. Bell. He's so spiritual. So lofty."

"Yes. Six feet in his stockings," said Mrs. Bell, cruelly.

"Now, is he? Well, I was always very fond of a tall man." Mr. De Lent was very short. "But about the neurasthenia. You see, I know just how it is to feel exactly as your baby acts. Oh, I assure you, I had to exercise the most rigid self-control to keep myself

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from screaming. But you couldn't expect that in a little sweetsy-tweet, could you, now?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Bell, stubbornly.

"Oh, no! You really couldn't." Mrs. De Lent looked profound. "I tried the Rest Cure. It saved me. But it's awfully expensive. Because there isn't any treatment, you know. You just go there and keep still. I don't know, though, whether they take infants. But you could find out, couldn't you? I'll send you the address."

As she rose to go, after a call prolonged until Mrs. Bell wondered how soon it would be before she burst into tears and joined in the baby's distant howls herself, Mrs. De Lent said, earnestly:

"And whatever you do, my dear

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Mrs. Bell, don't feed him meat, especially pork."

"Meat?"

"Yes, meat. It is the root of all the sin and suffering in the world. Now there is my husband. While I was away he boarded with a carnivorous family, and in spite of all the injunctions I had given him, he gave way to temptation, and ate it freely, I know. Of course, it has all settled solidly in the tendrils of his feet, and he is suffering agonies from what he obstinately calls rheumatism. I tell him he should be honest enough to call it cannibalism. You know, I'm very much inclined to be theosophical myself, and there's the transmigration of souls and all that. You see, we really don't know who the sheep and the cows and the pigs may actually be. Why, it's an awful thought."

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"Douglas," said Mrs. Bell, solemnly, to her husband at the supper-table, "pause before you eat that pork. Mrs. De Lent says it may be Shakespeare, or the Queen of Sheba."

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CHAPTER II

"Douglas, who do you think's been here now," exclaimed Mrs. Bell, breathlessly, one afternoon as her husband came in after a round of calling. He looked gloomy, and she supposed that he must have met some of the saints who considered it their mission in life to point out faithfully to their pastor his many and varied shortcomings.

"Why, Mrs. Bradney. And she was perfectly lovely. You can't think what she said about you—that you're so clever, and I must be so proud of you. Oh, heaps of nice things, dear."

Mr. Bell brightened. For, after all, if he could please Mrs. Bradney, the personage of whom it was commonly

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said that when she snuffed all Sand Harbor sneezed, why, it didn't much matter if Mrs. Hopley did announce with an air of finality that she hadn't any use for "such broken and empty vessels as poor human intellex in the pulpit, Mr. Bell. Now, if what you preached at us three weeks ago last Sunday wasn't Universal Salvation, Mr. Bell, then I don't know what Universal Salvation is. And Mr. Hopley said to me, as we walked home after that sermon, 'Maria, there's no hope for the world without hell. Why, if I didn't believe in eternal punishment, I'd like to know what there'd be to keep me from just going in to have a real good time, like the rest of the fellows, right off.' "

"Oh, there would always be Maria," was the retort which ached for utterance on Mr. Bell's lips, but he prudently repressed it, and patiently

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resigned himself to a prolonged dissertation on the remarkable mental outfits with which it had pleased Providence to endow the Hopley children.

Mr. Bradney had owned the "Mills," and the "Mills" had been Sand Harbor's only logical excuse for being, and though after his death his wife had disposed of the business and lapsed into a lessening interest in the town, with its increasing swarm of strange faces, she retained her proud place in its traditions, and to be "known" by Mrs. Bradney was still its most coveted social distinction.

"Oh, I suppose we looked just like 'Dignity and Impudence,' " continued Mrs. Bell, "for she's tall and stately, and her eyes—whew! they screw into you like gimlets. But her hair's lovely, soft and white, like spun snow."

"Now, Betty—"

"Oh, I know, Douglas. You

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haven't the least imagination, dear. But you know what I look like, anyway, a kind of Japanese chipmunk in petticoats. But I made up my mind I wasn't going to be scared by her, so I thought I'd pretend she was the scared one, and after that we got along beautifully. But what do you think she says, Douglas?" Mrs. Bell's voice became portentous. "She says the baby's hungry. Hungry! Just think of that!"

"Well, then, Betty, let's feed him," exclaimed Mr. Bell, impulsively.

Mrs. Bell looked at her husband reproachfully. "Oh, yes, Douglas, that sounds easy. But I can just tell you this: if we do feed him, it means giving up the last principle I've stuck to all the way through. I told Mrs. Bradney I didn't see how he could be hungry, for the only rule that I hadn't broken was that I always fed him by

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the clock." A half-smile crossed Mrs. Bell's face. "She said she'd have more confidence in a bottle herself."

"A bottle!"

"Why, of course, Douglas."

"Oh, I don't know about that, Betty."

"Well, I thought you were in pretty much of a hurry just now to express yourself. You see now what it means. Still, Douglas, she said she lost her eldest boy just like—like this."

Of course that settled it, and in a very little while Mr. Bell was hurrying down town after the implements of nutrition.

It being his first purchase in that particular line, he was naturally anxious to shine in the transaction, and accordingly he bought the most expensive and most dexterously complicated bottle known to the trade. He found out later that you could do almost any-

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thing with it, except feed the baby—that is, if you or the baby were in a hurry about it. For after you had once got the food into it, it was necessary to make arrangements to get it out again.

And that was just where the patent self-adjusting cap made a fool of you.

Mr. Bell said a great many things that evening which sounded orthodox enough to be in a Middle-Aged sermon on the eternal destiny of the wicked, and yet his strong statements of these grand old truths seemed to scandalize his wife.

"Douglas, the deacons," she suggested once, by way of remonstrance.

"Hang the deacons," retorted he, recklessly. But it was an hour and ten minutes after the bottle first came into the house before they finally succeeded in inducing that patent self-

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adjusting cap to let them adjust it. And then Mrs. Bell, who secretly hated the horrid thing which was going to steal her rights from her, flew moaning to the garret with a towel over her head. But she only stayed there one minute, after all, and then nearly fell down the two flights of stairs in her anxiety to find out what "he did do with it, anyway."

There was a while of awful suspense as Baby Bell sampled the new arrangement with various expressions of derision and contempt, which alternately delighted and depressed Mrs. Bell; but at last he evidently made up his mind that he had got on to a good thing, and had better stick to it. And he actually fell asleep before ten o'clock, with a bland and beatific smile upon his cheeks, but from sheer force of habit his parents watched him on tip-toe for some hours as charily as if

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he were a dynamite bomb warranted to explode on sight.

And now began a new era—a bottle era—in the Bell household. For after a while the baby formulated a theory on the subject of bottles which showed him to be an early convert to the views of certain social economists along the same lines. The child was plainly of a philanthropic turn of mind, and knew instinctively what was to the interest of the workingman. And so he promptly smashed his bottles as soon as they went dry.

But Mrs. Bell, who was an economist of the domestic variety, which is quite another thing, saw the matter in a very different light, and Mr. Bell grew weary of furnishing a joke to the drugstore. Then one day a most brilliant idea occurred to Mrs. Bell. Why, there were all those piles of bottles in the cellar. She was astonished

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at her stupidity in never having thought of them before. Surely, with a little adjustment they would serve baby's purpose admirably.

She laughed a good deal at his appearance when she set him out in the warm sunshine in his carriage, half an hour later, but as long as he enjoyed the big black bottle, what did it matter? Then she went back to the kitchen, and carefully cleaned and scalded six others of the same kind, so as to have them ready for emergencies. "I can't think why those people had so many bottles," she said, innocently, referring to the former tenants of the house. "And they seem so clean, and don't smell of anything; but I had better give them a good airing, and make sure."

She hunted about, but she could not find any place to put them, except the end of the front veranda, where

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the sun shone strongly now; and though she felt a little doubtful about it, she soon concluded that it would be all right, for it was such a quiet street, with hardly anybody passing but the farmers on their way into town. She did long to call Mr. Bell to look at the baby, lying there clasping that huge thing with both hands, but she must not do that, for she knew he was putting the last ornamental touches on the great sermon he was to preach to-morrow in a neighboring town, with whose pastor he was to exchange pulpits.

But in spite of his feverish absorption in his subject, Mr. Bell, whose study table was close to the window, could not ultimately avoid becoming conscious that everybody who passed his house stopped and stared as if something were the matter with it. He thought at once that the kitchen chim-

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ney must be on fire. But no, it could not be that, for while some people shook their heads gravely, most of them walked past grinning.

Well, he could not stop to investigate the matter now, for he had spent more time over his sermon than he had supposed, and he saw with alarm that he had barely time to catch his train. He gathered up his papers and a few books, hastily rammed them into his valise, and bounced downstairs. Mrs. Bell met him in the hall. He had never seen her so cheerful before when he was going away.

"Oh, Douglas, do come and see! Isn't it lovely? Did you ever see him look so sweet? Isn't it ridiculous?"

He looked out. There in the gay sunshine lay that baby, with a fat, boozy smile on his face, lazily imbibing his means of existence through a beer-bottle—yes, a beer-bottle.

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"Isn't it a good idea, dear? Such nice bottles, and lots of them."

"Yes. No. I can't tell. I mean, I think so, but I hope not," answered Mr. Bell, very much at random, it seemed to his wife. "Be sure you explain, Betty."

And then he rushed away, providentially unobservant of the six other bottles boldly reposing on their sides in the eyes of all beholders.

But in an incredibly short space of time all Sand Harbor was talking about that baby and the beer-bottles. For Deacon Creak, driving into town, saw the whole thing with his own eyes—and his wife's—and casually mentioned it to Deacon Pringle, who was a man of convictions, and worshiped a cold-water God; and before Deacon Creak, who was a mild-eyed, meek-voiced man, could at all comprehend what was happening, he found himself the

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center of an interested throng in the grocery, and under Brother Pringle's masterly cross-examination, committed to statements which afterwards appalled him.

"That baby—yes, a child of the covenant—we are told, you know, to avoid the appearance of evil." Here he paused a moment, but under Deacon Pringle's compelling eye, he straightened his spine aggressively, as if to assure everybody and himself that it was not built of melted butter. "We regret to have discovered, sir, that—that—that the offspring of our—our pastor, which they vowed—vowed before us all, us all, to love, honor and obey, as it were, in the fear and admonition of the Lord—" A suppressed giggle distracted him just as he had felt himself on firm ground and doing beautifully. "Well, our offspring—no, your offspring, I mean"—

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he fixed his soft blue eyes on Deacon Pringle, who shook his head at him violently—"has been—been—"

"Drinking!" broke in Deacon Pringle, heavily.

"Guzzling!" he added, after an awful pause.

"Beer!"

Just as he might have said "Blood!"

"Beer?" exclaimed Mr. Inskip, in horror.

"Beer!" repeated Deacon Creak, doubtfully. "Oh, Brother Pringle, I don't think—"

"Well, do you know what I think?"

It was a cool, jibing voice from the edge of the little gathering, and everybody turned to look at Vandelia Crane, Mrs. Bradney's domestic factotum.

"I think I'd just as soon be waited on as not, Mr. Pringle, if you can conveniently part with a little of your valuable time."

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Mr. Pringle slipped unctuously behind his counter.

"Yes, yes, Miss Crane; certainly, certainly, with the greatest pleasure, Miss Crane." He leaned towards her confidentially. "These country people, you know, they like their bit of talk when they come into town, and a storekeeper's got to humor them, you know, Miss Crane. Still, if what they say is so—and I don't see how it could be, only for Deacon Creak's word—that child was actually discovered in a drunken stupor, with one bottle of distilled damnation at his lips and six empty ones at his side."

Vandelia Crane threw back her head and laughed. "Say, don't you think you're a pretty shoddy saint?" she said, as she picked up her purchase. "If I were you, I wouldn't repeat that story till I'd investigated it some further. It might hurt trade. Mrs.

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Bradney says that young preacher of yours is smarter than greased lightning."

And after that nobody outdid the subtle grocer in pain and astonishment at Deacon Creak's statements—those astonishing statements which the pooraddle-minded old man sorrowfully acknowledged as his own because Mr. Pringle had such abundant proof that they were.

But among his cronies Mr. Pringle continued to relate the story so often and with such intangible intricacies of meaning that there are still people who could not be persuaded to abandon their belief in the minister's intoxicated baby and the half-dozen of beer.

CHAPTER III

The summer waxed and waned, and in the fall the Bells found themselves confronted with the problem of another winter in a house on the ragged edge of the wrong side of Sand Harbor.

"If it were only a mile and a half on the other side, it wouldn't matter so much," said Mrs. Bell, with a sigh. "So few of our people live out this way. Just think! We're three miles from Mrs. Bradney, and after all, Douglas, you know I like her better than anybody else in Sand Harbor."

Mr. Bell smiled. "I dare say, Betty. I haven't a doubt there are lots of people in Sand Harbor who would be very glad to like her better than anybody else, too."

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Mrs. Bell tossed her head saucily. Her expanding intimacy with the mistress of Hill House was at present a source of great pride to her, and though she sometimes wondered what was the secret of the older woman's sudden fancy for her, such questions are so easily answered when it is one's self who is the favorite.

As for Mrs. Bradney, she wondered a little about it herself. But that baby had interested her from the beginning; she had always liked boys, big loud boys, and never more than now, when in her bitterness of spirit she compared them with girls. Her boys, if they had lived would never have humiliated her as her daughter had done—that child who had been as near to her as the beating of her heart. They would have had the pride and backbone of their mother. She was

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sure of that. Hilary had been like her father, easy and yielding.

And so, as a sop to her hungry heart, she had sought to interest herself in Baby Bell, and when he had so royally justified her advice and grown fat and flourishing on it by the minute, and had then sought to earn a dizzy reputation for himself by beer-bottles, and lots of them, she had been maliciously charmed with him, and had paraded the story far and wide, to the discomfiture of its authors. And his parents—"the children," as she called them—she liked to watch them, for it took her back thirty years or more, away back to those early beginnings among the shrouded memories of the past, which were so much more vivid than anything she experienced now in the life which was like an ugly dream to her. It was a relief to escape from

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it into the sweet, fresh atmosphere of these young, courageous lives.

The end of the matter was that just as the first snows fell white upon the hills and drifted deep in the hollows, the Bells moved into a house a little way out on the long, lonely road which led to what all Sand Harbor knew as the Hill House.

Some of their people objected to this arrangement, but then, as Mr. Bell said, there were some people who were bound to object to anything anybody did, particularly if he was their pastor, and especially if he did nothing.

"I'm afraid you'll be real lonely," said Mrs. Pringle, pityingly. "Now, if you had taken the Drake house, I could have been in and out all the time. But I can't climb that hill." And then Mrs. Bell silently blessed the hill in her heart.

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The Bells were reasonably wise for such young people, and had furnished their home on the principle that quality was better than quantity, which might come later, but they were much depressed at the amount of their household goods when they came to be measured by the capacity of a load at three dollars the trip; and though Mr. Bell considered himself rather an expert packer, there were desperate moments when they both meditated darkly amid their domestic ruins and each suspected incendiary tendencies in the other's bosom.

But they worried through it somehow, and packed bric-à-brac in the bread-box, and onions and tea and turnips along with several pounds of butter in the wash-boiler, which Mr. Bell in a frenzied moment set on top of the hot stove, out of harm's way. Then the butter got loose and went

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where it was not expected, and Mrs. Bell made some strong remarks, especially when she discovered, too, a pint bottle of ink among the best tablecloths, and the coffeepot and teapot tied to the handle of the kerosene can, which happened to be overflowingly full. But Mr. Bell had reached the reckless stage, and said he didn't care, because he didn't expect to live through the experience, anyhow.

But Baby Bell's bohemian little heart exulted in the chaos which had overcome his tidy home. That the washtubs should be in the parlor and the plush chairs in the kitchen did not disturb him any more than when his father put him to sleep in the clothes-basket, which his mother had packed half-full of her best china. For, as Mr. Bell unfeelingly remarked when it was all over, and most of it had been transferred to the garbage-box,

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"Nothing was hurt with the exception of the china."

Baby Bell was becoming quite expert in the art of living, and only cried now when he had exhausted every other means of making the loudest noise. His mother thought he must have a remarkable ear for music; he could elicit such a variety of sounds from a tin pan and an iron spoon. But Mr. Bell felt a little sore on this subject. Of course, every man likes to see his children happy; it is quite another thing to hear them in the act.

They were charmed with the new house and its surroundings. There were no neighbors offensively near them, and Mrs. Bell rejoiced in the big, airy rooms, with their outlook upon enchanting glimpses of the lake—that is, until they came to put down the carpets, which she tugged at one end and Mr. Bell at the other, until

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only a miracle saved them from being torn into quarters—and until, in a sudden and absurdly premature cold snap, all the water-pipes burst, and were discovered to be of so queer and complicated a character that they bore no resemblance to anything in the earth beneath or the heavens above—except the plumber's bill. That fifteen dollars left a harrowing spot in Mrs. Bell's heart. She never ceased wondering what they might have done with it if they hadn't had to do that. It really seemed that no possible investment ever could have yielded such remarkable returns as that identical fifteen dollars, but for the perfidy of a plumber.

But after all, in due process of time they emerged from the state of savagery into which their moving had plunged them, and became again well-bred, self-respecting citizens, no

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longer under the fell necessity of eating soup with a salt-spoon or carving the roast with a fruit-knife. And when the fourteen thousand and sixty-third tack had been driven to its final home, and the step-ladder had made positively its last appearance in the parlor, Mrs. Bell admitted that she must now turn her attention to the domestic problem, though she had declared that she would never, never keep a girl again, owing to the fiendish atrocities committed by the last one upon the dinner-service. According to Mr. Bell, she should have engaged a servant just before they moved, but she had coldly scouted the idea of such a thing.

"Why, it would simply ruin any servant, Douglas, to bring her into the midst of all this confusion. She would get such an impression of disorder that she would never be a tidy girl as long as she lived with us."

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"Well, if she's such a confirmed imbecile that she can't succeed in acquiring in time the impression that we don't always eat our dinners off individual soap-boxes, I think we'd better find it out quick," said Mr. Bell, warmly. "A girl like that wouldn't blink at making the baby into mock-duck soup some Sunday morning when you're at church, if she ran short of ingredients."

But Mrs. Bell obstinately stuck to her own view of the case, and whenever she needed help "got in" a char-woman of the poor-but-honest-if-homely-widow variety. This system might have continued indefinitely if Mrs. Baggs had not developed a curious little habit of rushing in upon her the last thing before she went home to say breathlessly:

"Oh, Mis' Bell! There's a few little old scraps in the pantry; no lady

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like you would wish to use 'em, ma'am, and it's too bad to throw out food that my poor children—yes, Mis' Bell, I'm obliged to own we've got down to where they acshully would eat a dog's leavin's—yes, ma'am, thank you, ma'am.'" And then before Mrs. Bell could rally her recollections of the larder, Mrs. Baggs would have escaped with the potatoes and steak reserved for breakfast, as well as the chicken croquettes waiting under a plate for supper. But that was not the worst. Things vanished which Mrs. Baggs did not think it worth even her breath to mention. Mrs. Bell tried the effect of polite, serious, and finally severe remonstrance, but it was a great waste of time and energy. Mrs. Baggs prided herself on her honesty, and never admitted anything in her past career likely to interfere with that estimate of herself. Every morn-

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ing she washed her slate clean morally, and began all over again.

"Shoes, ma'am? No, I don't remember nothin' about shoes, ma'am. It's affliction; that's what's done it, Mis' Bell. My memory ain't what it used to be, and if I seem lackin' in gratitood about a pair of old shoes you may have been kind enough to give me when I was here last, just put it down to affliction, ma'am."

Thus it was that it became necessary to relinquish Mrs. Baggs as too expensive a luxury, and then Mrs. Bell's fancy lightly turned to thoughts of "girls."

But at the end of six weeks she had experimented with seven, and could hardly think of the subject without hysterics.

Number One had a passion for bead trimmings, and salted the stew and seasoned the curry with the deadly

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drippings of her garniture. She had a standing recommendation from the dentist's wife. Number Two beat the baby with his own father's walking-stick, and ate up an entire angel-cake, Mrs. Bell's masterpiece, before the icing had had time to dry, and threw away the dish. Number Three excused her perfidy in going off and leaving the baby alone in the house at night by proudly describing herself as of an extremely nervous, sympathetic temperament.

"The least sound would set me off," she said, darkly.

"And yet you would leave my poor little baby here all alone the minute my back's turned!" exclaimed Mrs. Bell, resentfully.

"Oh, yes, ma'am! Because he's a child, and can be trained to stay alone just as well as not. But I ain't, and I never was, and I can't."

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Number Four, who started out brilliantly, said at the end of the second day that she was ready to "quit," unless they could have breakfast by 6:30 sharp. She liked to get her work out of the way early.

"But we never have breakfast before eight o'clock, and we never shall," declared Mrs. Bell, with unexpected firmness. "For I run this house just to suit my husband, and nobody else."

"You do?" exclaimed the girl, in genuine astonishment. "Well, I guess I'd better go, then, for 'twouldn't be the least bit of good for me to try to stay where things wasn't run to suit me."

Number Five was delicate and refined, and gave Mrs. Bell at once to understand that she considered housework most degrading, and that she expected her pursuit of it to be very brief. It transpired later, when she

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took to practicing the Mad Scene from "Lucia di Lammermoor" after the family had retired for the night, that she had fixed her leaping ambitions upon the operatic stage. Mrs. Bell remonstrated. "Oh, but I don't mind losing my rest," said the incipient star, fervently. "I'd lots rather sing than sleep."

"Yes, but as Mr. Bell and I can't sing, Arethusa, don't you think we might prefer to sleep?" inquired Mrs. Bell, gently.

Arethusa argued, but Mrs. Bell was adamant, and after that wild airs from the opera ceased to mingle with clerical dreams; but then Arethusa turned her mind to literature and art, and waylaid the irate minister at every turn in order to discuss æsthetics with him, while Mrs. Bell vainly tried to evolve plain-living order out of the high-thinking chaos in the kitchen. Clearly

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this would not do, and they were forced to part with Arethusa with some regret, for she had given them a great deal to laugh about in the brief days of her sojourn with them. The girl was quite sad at leaving them.

"I was so glad when I got here," she said, simply. "I thought you were educated folks, and that we'd understand each other."

These household treasures had all objected more or less strenuously to the existence of Baby Bell, but none quite as vehemently as Number Six. She was herself the first of a family of fourteen, however, and may naturally have felt some anxiety as to the possible overcrowding of the globe during her immediate lifetime.

"I like your place real well," she said, earnestly, "if 'twasn't for that baby. I come here first 'cause I liked the looks of your husband, and I

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don't mind you, but I just can't put up with that baby."

"What would you like me to do about it?" inquired Mrs. Bell, in a tone of ominous calm. "Would you like me to kill him off?"

The girl looked shocked. "Oh, no, ma'am! But if I was you, I certainly would try soothin' syrup. Lots of women does that. My mother had a rule that made a gallon at a time. You'd sleep better nights, and things would stay done daytimes, too."

But Mrs. Bell reasoned with Wilhelmina, and proved conclusively to her own satisfaction that soothing syrup was slow murder, and Wilhelmina said, "My! ain't that awful?" And after that delightful calm descended upon the Bell household, until Mrs. Bell discovered one day, by the luckiest accident, that Wilhelmina had taken to syrup-soothing the baby on

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her own account. The doctor stayed by him for some hours, and said when he went away that it had been a pretty close call, and Wilhelmina departed an hour or so later to seek another and a childless sphere of usefulness.

Number Seven inaugurated her term by a series of climaxes and anti-climaxes that proved conclusively that it was misapplied energy to reason from cause to effect or backward in her case. The first morning she raised an issue on the subject of roasts, and stuck to it. They were always cooked in the frying-pan on the top of the stove.

"But they would be raw inside," objected Mrs. Bell.

"Then fry him again," declaimed the girl, with Scandinavian calm.

"But it would be burnt black outside then."

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"Then cut him black off," suggested the maiden, resourcefully.

Mrs. Bell looked positively dangerous, but Ingri had often seen people look like that, and she was undismayed.

That afternoon a visitor claimed Mrs. Bell just as the baby was dressed for his walk, all but his cap.

"You'll find it in the entry, and be sure he's warm enough," said Mrs. Bell, hurriedly.

He was, for he went crowing through the streets with the tea-cosy on top of his head. Of course everybody met him, even his father, who wondered, with masculine brilliancy, what in desperation was the matter with the child's head. After a while it occurred to him.

"Say, Betty," he began when he reached home, "I met Laurie down town with a girl. He looked striking."

"Striking?" repeated Mrs. Bell, anxiously.

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"Yes. Kind of shako effect on his head, you know. Oh, everybody noticed it."

"Shako?" Mrs. Bell looked alarmed. "See here, Douglas, tell me this instant what you mean."

"Well, Betty, it looked like the tea-cosy, but perhaps it wasn't."

Mrs. Bell groaned. Then she went moodily to the window to wait for the procession. Presently she began to laugh, and laugh again.

"Douglas, what shall I do with her?"

"Drown her," he answered, solemnly. "In another incarnation she might catch on; she never will in this."

When the girl at last arrived, with slow, stately step, Mrs. Bell led her into the pantry.

"See! This is the pantry; not the entry. This is the tea-cosy. This is the teapot; the tea-cosy goes on the

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teapot to keep it hot. Do you understand?" She hung the cosy back on its hook above the teapot.

The girl looked abused. "Boy's had on pod," she repeated, scornfully; but she absorbed the theory, for that evening, when she brought in the coffeepot, tall and slender, it was clad in the tea-cosy, short and stout.

"Still, after all, she's logical," urged Mr. Bell. "I never could understand myself why tea should be kept warm and coffee allowed to take cold."

"Oh, logical!" exclaimed Mrs. Bell, contemptuously; "she's logical enough to burn the house down so as to have a good fire to get the dinner by."

After supper Mr. Bell recalled the step-ladder from oblivion, and climbed up to repair the bell, which was slightly out of order. When he hoped he had finished, he called to the girl, who had watched his proceedings with great

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interest. "Now, Ingri, run out to the front door and see if it will go."

In a moment the bell whanged wildly around as if it had been struck by a social cyclone, and then there was a deadly calm.

"Douglas!" screamed Mrs. Bell, from the head of the stairs, "what are you doing down there?"

"Trying to pray for grace to bear it," answered Mr. Bell, fiercely; "for I know that donkey is lying on her back in the middle of the road, taking deadly aim at the zenith with my bell-handle."

But she was not, for she met Mrs. Bell half-way down the hall, firmly gripping the handle, with about three feet of wire trailing behind her.

"I got him; he go," she said, cheerfully displaying the wreck.

"Still, Douglas, I think she's logical, you know," said Mrs. Bell, cruelly, as she vainly tried to soothe her husband's

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angry passions. "You told her to see if the bell would go, and she did, and—it went."

"Well, I guess she'd better go, too, if she values her health," said Mr. Bell, sullenly; "for I warn you, Betty, she'll never flourish under the same roof with me. And if I were you, I'd find out all she knows on the subject of gas before she goes to bed, or she'll blow it out sure and get herself asphyxiated."

Mrs. Bell did. She went through a little drill again, when the girl came and asked her for a "lamb-b" to go to bed with.

"Gas is much safer than a lamp. This is the gas. This is the match. This is where you strike the match; no, never on the paper or the bed. This is where you turn it on. This is how it lights. That is how it burns."

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"Burns what?" asked the girl, suspiciously.

"Why, the gas, of course."

"I dought you said dot was der gozz," objected the girl, grasping the pipe like a Samson.

"No, this is the gas," sighed Mrs. Bell, wearily, impaling the flame on a hat-pin. "And this is how you turn it off. And this is when it's out."

"Oud," repeated the maiden, dutifully.

"Now, if you're afraid of it," said Mrs. Bell, as she lighted it again, "I'll come in and put it out when you are in bed."

But the girl snorted dangerously. "No, no! I do dot for meinselv."

"Very well; but be sure you don't blow it out," urged Mrs. Bell for the fiftieth time.

"Blow him oud," repeated the scholar, obediently, and retired.

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But she did, just the same, and was discovered half an hour later frantically trying to climb the bare wall of her bedroom, apparently under the impression that the ceiling afforded the safest means of exit, and screaming hysterically:

"Oh, led me oud! Save me! I'm smudderin'! Murder! Help! Oh, oh!"

She was rescued from an odorous death, but she refused to stay in the house another hour, "mit beobles vot did such tings," and Mr. Bell was finally forced to escort her to her home, a mile and a half out of town.

When he returned, a good deal sooner than Mrs. Bell expected him, he entertained her with a very suspicious account of his trip.

"Oh, it's a cold night, my dear; fifteen below zero, I should judge; and I walked fast, yes, very fast, until we

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reached the Mile Bridge, when I stopped and told that Swedish gymnast that I guessed the home of her 'barents' was just where it always had been, but that if she had any difficulty in locating it I hoped she'd let me know to-morrow. Yes, she made remarks; there was the force of a Gatling gun about them, but I merely said good by, and came away."

"But, Douglas, she'll lose her way, and freeze to death."

"I shouldn't wonder," he said, hopefully, and went to sleep.

And Mrs. Bell never could arrive at the actual facts about that excursion, for the mere mention of it always served to fire both Mr. Bell's temper and his imagination.

But the next morning the domestic sky was clouded, for the baby was cross, and the bread was frozen, and the fire was cranky, and as they had

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forgotten to put out the pan for the milkman when he came around about five o'clock, there was no milk for breakfast. When at last Mrs. Bell sat down beside the waters of the dishpan and wept, Mr. Bell jammed his hat on his head and went out, with the desperate air of a man determined to do something, or die in the attempt, at least.

When he returned, some hours later, he had the aspect of one who has conquered fate in a face-to-face conflict.

"I'd like some lunch, quick," he said to Mrs. Bell; "and then I'm off, and you needn't expect me back until I get here with Jeanie."

"Jeanie! But who's Jeanie, I'd like to know?"

"She's her aunt's niece; and her aunt says her people won't want to let her come, but that if I just sit right down and say I've come to stay until

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Jeanie goes back with me, she guesses I'll get her."

"Now, Douglas!"

"All right! You'll see. But she lives ten miles out, and if I have to sit there long, it may be some time before I get back."

It was dark when he returned, but he had Jeanie with him. Mrs. Bell gasped when she saw her.

"Why, Douglas, she's a child!"

"Yes; about thirteen in years, but quite thirty in experience."

"Thirteen!" Mrs. Bell sniffed contemptuously. "And such a looking girl, Douglas! Such a chunk!"

"Oh, she isn't a show-case beauty, Betty. But they say she's all wool and a yard wide, and warranted fast color, and guaranteed good wearing, and thirteen to the dozen every time, Betty."

"Well, she looks to me for all the

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world like a home-made rag doll. Still, perhaps she'll do."

And Jeanie did "do." Sometimes extraordinarily well, and occasionally quite ill; but always with an eye single to the interests of Baby Bell, with whom she had established free-masonical relations from the instant of her entrance into his home. Her affection was of the passionate, exclusive kind, and she speedily identified herself so completely with the household which she served that her hand was against every man, woman, and child, particularly baby, outside of it. Barely to suggest to her that any other baby possessed some slight claim to beauty or sweetness was to set her tongue wagging at both ends in bitter disparagement of such ludicrous statements about any child, save only and forever Baby Bell.

She had a stringent shrewdness in

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dealing with the outside world which Mrs. Bell found sometimes embarrassing, but always edifying.

"Did you have money enough to pay for the groceries, Jeanie?"

"Yes, ma'am; I made it do."

"Made it do?"

"Yes, ma'am. That black-hearted villyun of a grocer wanted twenty cents for his eggs, but I just said to him, 'I'll take a dozen, but I'll no be givin' ye more than fifteen cents for them, for that's all I've got, and it's a great deal more than they're worth, anyway.' The store was full of people, and they laughed, the triflin' things, but I didn't weary myself noticin' them."

She rigorously measured and re-measured the milk before the milkman's eyes every time he brought it, and she told the gas-meter man that he was a hardened old Ananias-and-Sapphira, and was destined to be eter-

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nally smothered in the fumes out of which he had cheated people here on earth. Nothing escaped her small, black, anxious eyes; she had the natural gifts of a born shrew. She soon became a terror to all the pranking small boys in the neighborhood. Other people's windows might be broken by stray stones; the Bells' were only broken once after Jeanie took their domestic affairs in hand. That time she caught the boy, and dragged him to the kitchen, and held him there, helpless prey to an eloquence more awful than any "punching," while for one long quarter-hour she pictured to him the horrors of his downward career from the moment he threw that stone until he fell from the gallows plump into perdition.

She had not been in Mrs. Bell's employ a month before she had discovered the actual and aspirational standing of

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everybody in Sand Harbor, but she had a method of reassigning them to a status of her own which was very spicy.

"Oh, there goes that Mrs. Oblender; and she pretends to believe that everybody else believes that she's a lady."

"But, Jeanie, I'm sure she's a very kind-hearted woman," said Mrs. Bell, reproachfully.

"Kind-hearted! H'm! She needs to be, to put up with herself. Just look at her now, airing herself around like a great peacock! Poor silly! Don't she know that if a peacock had more head to keep brains enough in, he'd have less tail?"

"But, Jeanie, Mr. Bell says she—"

"Why, of course he does," interrupted Jeanie, suavely. "A man can't never tell a woman from her petticoats."

Jeanie was Scotch—and sorry for it.

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She cultivated Americanisms with a zeal that sometimes produced startling results.

"Is the minister at home?" blandly inquired a clerical-looking person at the door one day.

But Jeanie had seen that sort before, and shrewdly suspected his coat-tails of harboring a subscription book.

"No, he ain't," she said, firmly. "He's gone to preach the sermon at the State Association, and anybody but a blame book-tramp would have known it."

But he was not a "blame book-tramp"; he was one of the biggest toads in the ecclesiastical puddle, himself on the way to the gathering in question. Fortunately, he had a royal sense of humor, and Mr. Bell and the Association heard the joke a little later.

"But, you know, Jeanie, it might

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have been fatal," said Mrs. Bell, solemnly. "You must exercise a great deal of discretion about answering the door."

"Discretion!" echoed Jeanie, in a tone of grievance. "And then when I let the scented-soap peddler in last week, because he was dressed like a gentleman, and smelt like one, too, Mr. Bell wasn't pleased, either."

CHAPTER IV

"Jeanie's aunt was here this afternoon, Douglas, and she says that Miss Bradney is coming home the end of this week."

"Oh!"

Mrs. Bell surveyed her husband for a moment in silence; then she shook her fist at him.

"Douglas, what did I say to you?"

Mr. Bell dragged his eyes off his book, and looked guiltily at his wife. Then he brightened up, and said, briskly:

"Yes, dear; how much do you want? Will a couple of dollars do? It's all I've got in the house."

Mrs. Bell snorted.

"Douglas, do you think I can't

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come near you without wanting to hold you up?"

But she was bursting with intelligence, and could not afford to be cruel to herself, just then, for the mere sake of properly disciplining her husband.

"Just think, dear." ("That's what I was trying to do," muttered Mr. Bell, rebelliously.) "She says Miss Bradney is really engaged to old Mrs. Hessemer's son—you know, his father used to be Mr. Bradney's foreman for years and years. Just think of that!"

Mr. Bell compelled his mind to bear on the subject, and then said, weakly, "Well?"

At that Mrs. Bell simply pounded him. "Well!" she echoed, scornfully. "As if such a thing could be well, goosey. Why, it's awful. Even Mrs. McAlpine, one of the Hessemer's own class, as you might say, sympathizes entirely with Mrs. Bradney."

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"Oh, I dare say. There's sometimes nobody quite so jealous of what we call the working people as some other working people."

"Of course he's not a workingman, Douglas. Mrs. McAlpine says he's been away for years at college, and that he's a professor, or going to be, or something like that."

"Well, then, what's anybody got cramps about?" demanded Mr. Bell, belligerently. "Where can you find a nicer, more intelligent woman in our whole parish than Mrs. Hessemer? And wait! Why, somebody told me quite lately that if Bradney hadn't been as grasping as a pair of pincers, Hessemer never would have lived and died just foreman of the mills."

"But you see, Douglas, he did," said Mrs. Bell, from the unsentimental standpoint of cold fact. "And I think it's just awful for Mrs. Bradney."

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Of course that's why Miss Bradney's been away all this time."

"But I don't see why," objected Mr. Bell, stubbornly.

"Douglas, can't you see that it's horrible for them to be alone together under such circumstances?"

"No, I should think it would be nice. Women ought to be thankful enough when they get fine, promising young fellows to burden themselves up with their useless old daughters. And I hope he'll get a pot of money for all his trouble."

"Douglas, you're as disgusting as—a Mormon," said Mrs. Bell, indignantly. But in a minute she laughed, and her husband kissed her, and then she went on again.

"You see, Miss Bradney simply won't give him up, and when she's at home she and her mother hardly ever speak."

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"Then I should think she'd stay away."

"Yes, but Mrs. Bradney has sent for her. She has been in New York, studying art."

"Heart, you mean," suggested Mr. Bell, frivolously, but his wife froze him with a look.

After this Mrs. Bell saw Miss Bradney in church several times, and studied her with furtive curiosity.

"It's her hair," she announced with conviction to Mr. Bell one Sunday at dinner.

"Oh, I hope so," he retorted, quickly. "In one so young—really, store hair would seem out of character."

"Now, Douglas, you know quite well what I mean. It's her hair that makes her look like that. She really wouldn't be much without it."

"No, I suppose not." Mr. Bell

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passed his hand experimentally over his own head. "I don't imagine that I, or even you, Betty, would look well entirely bald. As a test of beauty I should call that severe."

Mrs. Bell loftily ignored these remarks, and maintained a stony silence while she drank a cup of coffee.

"I never saw such delicious hair—great pale gold masses of it rippling back from her face; and then that lovely black velvet hat on top of it—why, Douglas, she just looked like a sad, sweet Madonna this morning."

"Yes, I dare say," said Mr. Bell, with a desire to please. "Still, Betty, a Madonna in a modern big hat—it's rather straining on the imagination, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, dear, on yours. But you know, Douglas, I really suppose her hair is about all there is of her."

Mr. Bell looked so innocently aston-

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ished at this statement that Mrs. Bell, scenting mischief, hurried on.

"I mean, dear, that kind of looking woman is always stupid or spiteful or stubborn, or something of that sort."

"Oh, of course, dear," said Mr. Bell, largely. But his eyes were twinkling, and Mrs. Bell felt it.

"It's simply ridiculous," she said, severely. "I believe you would actually uphold that girl in marrying on a beggarly salary, or none at all for that matter—now what are you laughing at?"

Mr. Bell became instantly meek. "Oh, nothing, dear. I was only thinking how wise, worldly wise, a maiden becomes as soon as she is married herself."

Mrs. Bell blushed. "Well, Douglas, I think our case was entirely different."

"Yes, to be sure, dear. It always is, I believe."

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A few days after this Mrs. Bell, calling at the Hill House, expressed a desire to see Miss Bradney.

"Perhaps you would like to come with me to the studio," said Mrs. Bradney. "Hilary is busy there just now."

They found the girl, enveloped in a big apron, kneeling on the floor in front of a little cabinet. She rose with a quick flush of embarrassment.

"Oh, is it wood-carving you do?" exclaimed Mrs. Bell. "Why, how lovely that is!"

Miss Bradney smiled. "It really isn't, you know," she said, shyly.

"It's just beautiful," contended Mrs. Bell, stoutly; and then she swarmed all over the room with a charming audacity which was fatal to constraint, pulling out this and that, and bubbling over with delighted comment.

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"Yes, Hilary is really clever," said Mrs. Bradney. "I am very anxious for her to go abroad with me this summer, and study under some one who knows enough to teach her what she's ready to learn now."

"Then you really think of going away?"

"Oh, yes. We shall go in April."

Mrs. Bradney spoke with peculiar decision. Mrs. Bell turned to the girl.

"Won't that be splendid? Aren't you wild at the very idea?"

Perhaps Hilary felt that she could truthfully say she was, but she hesitated, and a hot wave of color rose cruelly across her pale cheeks. "I don't know," she said at last, and then she began to gather up her tools nervously, and Mrs. Bell soon went away, acutely pondering the little scene upon which she had stumbled.

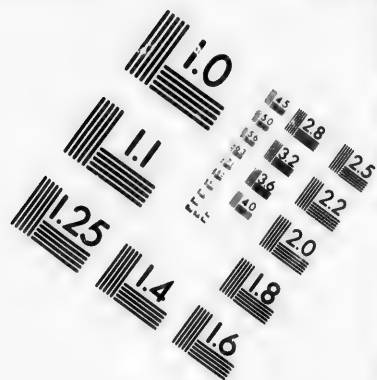
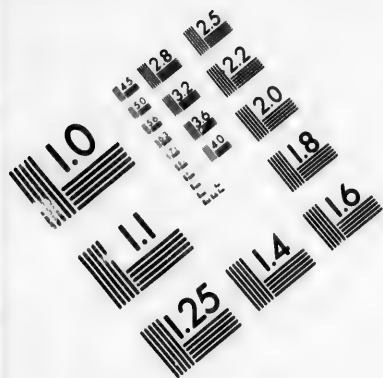
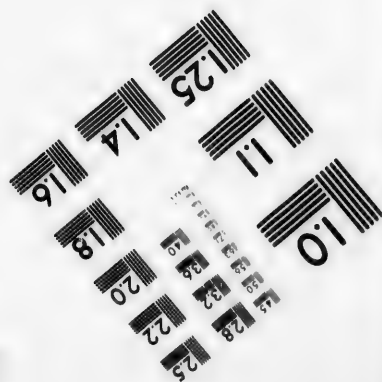
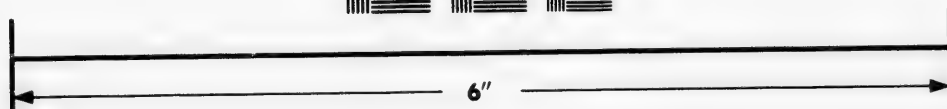
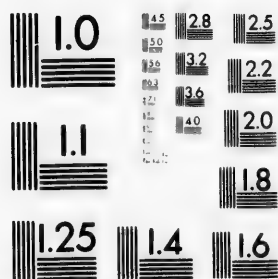


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But not as acutely as the girl, left alone to realize silently all her dread of the scheme she felt slowly coiling about her. This, then, accounted for the complete change in her mother's manner since her return. She had gone away under a blast of scorn and repudiation, but she came home again to find herself once more the idolized child, whose lightest wish must be law. But she had not been deceived by this tender air of relenting in her mother, for she knew instinctively that it boded no good to her lover, and there still lingered in her the pathetic belief of the child in the parent as a species of overruling providence which could inevitably accomplish its purposes somehow.

And now suddenly she had felt the grip of the iron beneath the velvet, and her fears quickly filled in the details of her mother's plan. With the

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ocean once put between herself and her lover, there seemed a chance to her excited fancy for anything to happen. Day after day she struggled for courage to go and talk over her difficulties with the minister's wife, who had seemed such a kind, sympathetic little woman, but then her pride would recoil from the thought of discussing her mother with an outsider.

And so time passed, even at the Hill House, until the wild winter winds which raged around it yielded to softer airs, and the aromatic sweetness of moist, swelling buds rose with the intoxicating incense of spring into the brooding blue of the sky. A tumult of awakening life stirred the long-silent echoes of the hills, as the shadows deepened beneath the quickening green of the trees. It was the dream-time of youth again, and Hilary's heart throbbed in unconscious

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rhythm with it. Hugo? Why, how could she help loving him? He had been part of her life from the time when she was a dainty little golden-haired girl in white frocks with pretty blue shoulder-knots, and he a glad-eyed boy, a great favorite in those days of Mrs. Bradney herself. She had often said that she thought as much of the boy as her husband did of his father, and with Hilary anywhere in his charge her mind was completely at rest.

And so the happy years had slipped by until, at seventeen, Hugo went away to college, spurred to this course by Mr. Bradney himself.

"I tell you," he often said to his wife, "the boy will do. He'll do."

"Do what?" inquired Mrs. Bradney, rather dryly, at last, and as she reflected in after years, with remarkable appropriateness.

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"Oh, anything. One never can tell. He must have a chance, though."

But it was four or five years before Hugo and Hilary met again. Mrs. Bradney took care of that, for she had suddenly conceived an idea which was very harassing to her, and eminently amusing to her husband, who was one of those men with supreme confidence in the enduring infancy of their daughters, and a possible lover for his "little Hilary" impressed him as the most remote of prospects.

Still, after this, when the young fellow came home on his vacations Hilary was always away, and when at last they did meet, it was under conditions so changed that the old frank companionship was clearly impossible.

It was the year after Mr. Bradney's death that Hugo boldly called at the Hill House, having learned that Miss Bradney was at home. But it was

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Mrs. Bradney who received the tall, handsome fellow, with a manner coldly suggestive of the gulf which yawned between them.

"Yes, Miss Bradney is at home, but I believe she is busy in the studio just now, and she would not care to be disturbed. I am glad to hear such good accounts of you. It must be very gratifying to your mother, and I hope you will always remember what great sacrifices she has made for you."

This was distinctly patronizing, and the feel of it proved unexpectedly stimulating to the young man.

"I am sorry not to see Hilary," he answered, recklessly; "and as to my mother—well, mother knows," he added, simply.

Mrs. Bradney was amazed and disconcerted at the change in him. For, apart from his undoubted gifts in the way of scholarship, he had the assured

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ease of a well-bred man of the world. "Just like one of ourselves," she admitted, grudgingly, to herself. But "Hilary!" What impertinence! And in view of all these circumstances, it seemed to her a particularly ill-timed dispensation of Providence that a sprained ankle should keep her a prisoner just when she most needed to be free.

"Oh, was that Hessemer boy at church this morning?" she asked, casually, when Hilary came home on the Sunday following his call at the Hill House.

"Hugo Hessemer? No, I don't think he was, but—" The girl hesitated. For some reason it seemed unexpectedly difficult to tell her mother what she had not dreamed of concealing.

"There! Don't talk to me, dear; my head is aching," said Mrs. Brad-

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ney, abruptly. The less Hilary thought about the boy the better. But what a child she was. It would probably never occur to her to regard herself in the light of a great "catch," whom this ambitious youth and his mother might well desire to land.

And as the days and weeks went by, and Mrs. Bradney's vigilance failed to detect any sign of the thing she dreaded most, the tension of her anxiety relaxed, and she indulged in a comfortable pride in her daughter's dignified perception of her exalted position.

And yet that Sunday had seen the germinating of a tiny seed which must have lain dormant in Hilary's heart ever since those halcyon, unforgotten days when Hugo had been her little knight. He had not been at church, and Hilary had not seen or thought of him until she turned from the town

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into the long, quiet Hill Road, with its shade so deep and cool, this warm June morning.

She stepped lightly along, busy with a young girl's pretty thoughts, until suddenly, stirred by some swift sense of an unseen presence, she turned her head.

"Hugo!"

"Oh, Hilary!"

But after that first eager moment it seemed that with every passing instant they drifted farther apart, for each was startled into vague dismay at the greatness of the change in the other, and presently they found themselves talking in a way distressingly unlike the happy hand-in-hand style of their memories.

"It is some time since we met," said Mr. Hessemer, with the dignity befitting a distinguished college career.

"Yes; it must be nearly five years,"

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replied Miss Bradney, with the reserve adhering to a long dress and grown-up hair.

By and by she glanced at him timidly. How handsome he was, and how cleverly he talked, when he let himself out a little, about his life in the university.

And as Hugo gradually recovered from his subtle sense of disappointment in this strange, this shy-eyed Hilary, he was thrilled by a new and exquisite sense of her maidenhood. He had suffered for the last year or two from the very young man's deep and incisive knowledge of women and their ways, and among the cigars and his chums he had said some very quotable things about the fair and frail.

But he forgot all about that now, when he looked down at the young girl beside him, in her soft white gown, with her sweet flushed face, now seek-

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ing his, and now shyly hidden beneath her big white hat.

"Do you remember," he said, when they paused in the moment of parting, "the little toys I used to whittle out for you, and the cradle I made for Araminta Maria?"

"Remember!" She lifted her eyes to him in smiling protest. "Why, Hugo, I've got them all now."

He walked away from her that Sunday morning, stirred by the first vague thrill of an emotion unrecognized, but already passionately sacred to him.

And the inevitable climax of it all came a year later, just before he sailed for Germany to take his post-graduate course, when he walked into Mrs. Bradney's presence one evening with Hilary's fluttering fingers in his own strong grasp.

Mrs. Bradney looked at her daughter.

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"You! You want to marry this—" But her proud voice failed her for a moment. "And may I ask why?"

"Because I love him," flashed Hilary, with quivering lips.

"Love!" Mrs. Bradney laughed, but there was no smile in her glittering eyes. "Don't talk to me of such nonsense."

"Oh, mother! didn't you love father?"

There was a pause. Then Mrs. Bradney said, deliberately:

"Your father was a gentleman."

Until now there had been no opportunity for Hugo to speak, for after his first quiet statement to Mrs. Bradney she had turned her back on him in furious contempt of his presence.

But now he stepped toward Hilary, and taking her cold hands in his, he said, with an accent which had a new

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quality of torture for the poor mother's heart:

"Hilary, have I asked too much? Is the sacrifice too great? I never realized until now the meaning of it all for you."

For one eternal moment he tasted again all the cruelty of suspense, for Hilary said nothing. She was looking at him with eyes full of the long last questions of the woman about to merge her future in the untried current of another life.

Then, with a little sigh, suddenly, appealingly, she stretched out her fluttering hands to his strong grasp.

And after that between her mother and herself there had grown up the silence too bitter to be borne, and at last she had gone away from home. But now, since her return, the complete change in her mother's manner toward her, coupled with this new idea

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of a trip abroad, filled her mind with sudden alarms. She wrote her lover long, tender letters, in which there was often a vague, pathetic strain; for she felt herself adrift from the old familiar moorings, and already far out upon the uncertain deeps of the future.

She had her real anxieties, too, about him, for beneath his light statement that in spite of his persistent advertisement of himself as a brilliant and epoch-making genius the world did not seem to be in any feverish quest of his services, she divined his own real anxiety about his future.

And then at last there came a morning when Mrs. Bradney said, with a new, hard note in her voice:

"Hilary, I find we could sail on the Gascoigne on the fifteenth. I think I shall write this morning to secure our staterooms."

Hilary started as if she had been

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struck. Her mother's cold, bright eyes held her for a moment with a kind of fascination; then she looked away, and said in a low, tremulous voice:

"No, mother, I can't go."

Mrs. Bradney said nothing. She stood there, silent and controlled, studying the girl's face, until Hilary spoke again.

"No, mother, I don't want to go."

"So you have said a great many times, I believe, and I have patiently waited weeks for you to come to your senses. It will be July now before we can sail, anyway, but I will give you until this evening to reconsider what you have said."

It was a day of torture to Hilary, and it ended with a scene so passionate that it ruptured irrevocably the exquisitely delicate relations between the mother and her child.

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"You will not go? You actually defy me?"

"Mother, I can't go. You know you are only planning this as a means of separating Hugo and me."

Hilary was white and quivering, but she was as aroused now as her mother.

"Yes, you are quite right about that. If I could separate you in no other way, I would see you in your grave before I would see you his wife."

In the total collapse of her plans Mrs. Bradney seemed to find a bitter satisfaction in flinging the secrets of them at her shrinking daughter.

"Oh, mother! Is it nothing to you that I love Hugo?"

The sobs rose up in Hilary's throat. "Do you care nothing about my happiness?"

"Happiness!" echoed Mrs. Bradney, scornfully. "No, I don't care

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anything about what you call your happiness. Happiness! Love! When you're a few years older, child, you'll find it takes something more than moonshine and cheap caresses to make a woman happy. Another man could have loved you just as prettily, and have given you a fair exchange for the privilege. Men are very much alike, Hilary; but birth or breeding and wealth and its luxuries are extenuating circumstances, of which you may learn the value only when it is too late."

"But, mother, you married father just because you loved him, and he was so poor then."

"Yes; but even granting that your father and this—this boy could be compared, you are not like I was. You have not the grit and the backbone to stand hardship."

Hilary's eyes glistened. "Mother,"

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she whispered, "I am just like you. And I love Hugo."

The sweet, shy word stung her mother.

"She loves him! Yes, and she will be his obedient 'frau,' ready to fetch and carry for her peasant lord. That's the way people of his class and nation think of their wives, my dear. And children—bah! it makes me sick."

Hilary broke down in tears. Her heart cried out for her lover, but this wrenching asunder of her own and her mother's life was like a cruel physical pain.

After this the old silence grew again between them and hardened into bitterness, and Hilary began to long for anything rather than this slow-dropping torture of suspense, this endless waiting for the storms which never broke. The fair, delicate face, en-framed in its pale gold hair, began to

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lose the charm of its young curve, the
clear cheek no longer flushed into
elusive beauty at the sweetness of some
betraying thought, and the shy, pretty
eyes took on the wild look of a
hunted thing.

CHAPTER V

In the middle of the night Mrs. Bell woke suddenly. She wondered why. Ha! She knew why. There was a man downstairs, a burglar, a blood-thirsty brute. Why, she could hear him plainly. The loose board in the hall flooring creaked under his stealthy step like a door with a cranky hinge.

Mrs. Bell lay still in an agony of indecision. A week before she would have known exactly what to do. She would have said: "Douglas, get up! There's a man downstairs."

But she knew better than to do that now. For as they had walked home from church on Sunday with Mr. Seerley, he had strikingly described to them a recent murder in St. Louis,

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and had philosophized on the case in a manner all his own.

"It's always the fool woman in the business," he had insisted. "It's the nature of a woman to be everlastingly on the spy. Any boy that's old enough to fit pants can tell you that. That's why they always sleep with one ear open, and naturally hear the burglar first. Then it's, 'John, John, get up quick! There's a man downstairs. Sic him, John!'" "

He looked at Mrs. Bell with a twinkle in his eye. And she was afraid she blushed. And she was so angry, too. Because, of course, that's just what she would have done. And why not, indeed?

"Now, if that woman would only use her headpiece," continued Mr. Seerley, "she'd know enough to lie still and let John keep right on snoring. And she'd let that burglar load

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on all the bric-à-brac he took a fancy to, and get away quietly and peaceably, when he got ready, after he'd had a good, square meal in the pantry and a tip-top booze in the wine-cellar. Then there'd have been nobody hurt and fewer things to dust next day. But no! It never occurs to that woman that her husband is worth more than all that bric-à-brac, to say nothing of the solid silver and all the loose change in his pants pocket, until she's got him shot.

"So what does this fool woman do in St. Louis? She prods John in the ribs until he's glad to try the tender mercies of the burglar by comparison; then she jams the revolver into his hand and hustles him downstairs. And when he's half-way down she lights up all the gas-jets in the top hall, so the burglar can see just where to hit, and then—bang!

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" 'Have you killed him, John?'

" 'Yes, ma'am,' says the burglar, politely; and then she faints, and he gets comfortably away with the bric-à-brac, after all, and that's the last of him.

"It's funny to me a woman can't learn that a burglar's pretty sure to be a dead shot, which her husband isn't, no matter what he may have told her to the contrary; and secondly, that a burglar doesn't want to shoot if he can possibly help it. Blood isn't any use to him. He wants the stuff, and that's all, and if she's got any sense, she'll let him have it and keep still."

But to this arrangement Mr. Bell unexpectedly objected.

"Seems to me it would require quite an outlay of self-control to lie still and keep right along snoring while that caller packed your outfit into his Saratoga in peace."

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"Oh, I didn't say 'twas easy," protested Mr. Seerley, laughing; "but if you think the other way's easier in the long run, there's nothing to hinder your trying it. But if you do that, you just accept my advice, and tie a feather pillow on in front of you for a breast-plate. There isn't anything'll shed a bullet like a feather pillow."

Every detail of this conversation recurred to Mrs. Bell's mind with startling clearness as she lay there trembling, straining her ear to catch the uncanny sounds below stairs.

But oh! she must call Douglas. Why, that man would come right up and shoot them in their beds. She knew he would. He'd even shoot Laurie—sweet, innocent, babbling little Laurie.

No, he wouldn't. Mr. Seerley said they never did, if you just let them alone and didn't interfere with them.

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But oh, listen! She was certain he was grabbing all the silver off the sideboard. Her housewifely soul took flame; in her anguish she whispered ever so gently, "Douglas! Douglas!"

But Douglas lay dumb as a door-mat to her terrors. He didn't even afford his family the protection of a snore. Smarting under a sense of injury that she, poor little lonely woman, should be sole guardian of their hearth and home, she stretched out her hand to give Douglas a warning pinch in the darkness. But no! She snatched it back. She would be noble, and walk in the way of wisdom as outlined by Mr. Seerley.

And let all her silver be calmly appropriated by a red-handed villain without so much as a protest?

Never!

She might have to die, to be sure, but she wasn't going to let that man

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have it all his own way, at any rate.

She slipped softly out of bed, and then she remembered the pillow. With shaking hands she tied it on to herself, and thus equipped she stole out of the room with a feather duster in one hand and a pitcher of water in the other. She had always known she was a coward, but she had never realized she could get so horribly frightened as she was now. She was nearly smothered by the pillow, too. Still, as she got used to it, it was wonderful what a sense of protection it gave. At last she reached the dining-room on legs that threatened momentarily to give way beneath her. But there was no one there. Even in the darkness she was sure of that.

She was getting braver. With hardly more than half a tremor she opened the door which led into the

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little passage between the dining-room and kitchen.

And then she was instantly confronted by a broad beam of light which streamed out at her from underneath the kitchen door.

She choked with terror, but without an instant's hesitation she opened it and stepped into the brightly lighted kitchen.

There at the table sat a tramp in active enjoyment of the ample meal he had gathered about him. Before he could collect his wits Mrs. Bell was upon him with the water-pitcher and the feather duster.

"Oh, you bad man!" she exclaimed. "How dare you? Go away! Go away at once! Aren't you ashamed of yourself, breaking into people's houses in the middle of the night like this?"

"See here, ma'am, don't ye take on

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so," said the man, earnestly. "I didn't break in. I just walked in. The door wasn't locked. I was hungry—awful hungry. Perhaps you ain't never felt that way."

He had risen and stood towering in front of her like a big abashed school-boy caught in the act.

Mrs. Bell faced him sturdily, the severity in her face gradually relaxing as they talked until finally she looked as sweet and sympathetic as if she were listening to her best friend's tale of woe. And she had never felt less afraid of anything than she did of that man from the moment he spoke to her. She forgot entirely that her toilet consisted of one pretty pink night-dress and one feather pillow. If the fashion struck the burglar as unusual, he at least had the grace to take it seriously.

"Well, if you're hungry," said Mrs.

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Bell, "sit down and finish your meal. And eat all you can."

But he looked suspiciously at the door behind her.

"No, you needn't be afraid. Nobody else is awake. And besides, no one would hurt you here. This is the minister's house. You say that nobody has been willing to give you anything to eat all day. I'm sorry you didn't happen to come here. I always tell Jeanie that as long as we have food ourselves we must share it with any one who has not."

The tramp looked up at her with the frank smile of a boy.

"N'yit that little Scotch gal o' yourn near chawed the head off'n me to-day 'cause I asked her for a bite. That's why I was so dead tickled to-night when I found the door 'd been left open an' the pantry so full."

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"Oh, Jeanie, Jeanie!" mourned Mrs. Bell. "I'm so sorry."

She had all the air now of the most solicitous hostess, and as she said afterward, she never entertained a guest in her life whom she took such solid comfort in feeding.

And while he fed she talked to him like his grandmother. She speedily unearthed his family history, and discussed it with a sympathetic interest which melted the villain's soul within him.

"It's all come from your quarreling with Susan Moore," she concluded at length. "Now you'd better go right back and tell her you're sorry, and begin all o—"

Just here the door opened and Mr. Bell walked in. As long as he lived he would remember the spectacle upon which his eyes alighted. But before he could adequately grasp all

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its various details there was a kaleidoscopic change in the situation, and the "burglar" had vanished into the darkness of night.

"Oh, Douglas!" exclaimed Mrs. Bell, reproachfully. "How could you? And I never said good by to him. And I did want to give him some more advice so badly. Poor man! I don't believe Susan Moore understands him one bit."

Mr. Bell promptly locked the kitchen door after the speeding guest. Then he sat down on a chair and began to laugh. And the longer he looked at Mrs. Bell the louder he laughed.

"Well, Betty," he gurgled at last, "if I were you, I'd undo the pillow and lay down the duster."

Mrs. Bell gasped.

"Oh, Douglas, I forgot all about the pillow! Oh, what a sight I look! Why, what did that man think? Oh,

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I'm so ashamed! But I was so frightened I forgot everything. You know I heard him. And Mr. Seerley—you remember?"

Mr. Bell's eyes softened.

"Oh, you poor little woman! Why, Betty, there isn't a cowardly bone in your body. You wee bit of a brave woman!"

"Oh, yes, Douglas, there is! You can't think how frightened I was. I thought I'd die when I saw the light under the kitchen door. But that poor man! He was so hungry. He ate like a boy at a church supper. Oh, I wish you hadn't come quite so soon! There were some things I did want to tell him so badly. I'd just enjoy talking to that Susan Moore. She doesn't begin to love him like she ought."

Mr. Bell had another paroxysm all to himself.

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"Betty," he said at last, solemnly enough, "if that fellow ever forgets the sermon you've preached to him to-night, his soul isn't worth worrying about. He's seen the bravest, truest, kindest little woman he's ever likely to meet in this world, and I don't believe he will forget it."

"Or the pillow, either," he added presently, with another burst of merri-ment. "But say, Betty, the next time you hear a burglar, never mind Seerley. You just punch me awake to a sense of my duty. I'd like a show occasionally."

"I don't know, Douglas," she answered, doubtfully. "I don't believe you're very sympathetic, dear."

"No, I don't believe I am, for a fact. I guess this fellow can thank his stars he was entertained at supper by my wife and not by me."

"Now, Douglas—"

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"All right, dear. You're the pluckiest little woman on top of the earth, and I'm the proudest man. But next time you punch me."

CHAPTER VI

Out in the warm sunshine summer was silently preparing its splendid exit in a hundred shades of scarlet and gold. Beneath the hazy sky late lingering fruits mellowed into purple and crimson, and the grain-crested fields yielded to the eager reaper their golden abundance. But the breath of change was in the scented air, still thrilling with the drowsy note of bees and brilliant with the flight of unwearyed wings. For beyond the rosy clouds were banked the cold snows of the long sleep into which nature was so soon to sink.

Mrs. Bradney shivered, but she was not thinking of the coming winter's chill; her hurrying thoughts were busy

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with visions of herself alone in the great house, with its echoing memories of weary feet long rested and the silenced music of clear childish voices, sweet and high.

And Hilary, the last of them all,—was Hilary to defy her, to set at naught all the proud traditions of her name and place? An angry sob choked her throat. Hilary to marry that boy, the son of her dead father's foreman! She repeated the words slowly, cruelly, to herself. She felt a desperate satisfaction in the sting of them.

A letter lay before her, which she had received that morning, and though her first impulse had been to destroy it unopened, she had ended by reading it greedily.

"MY DEAR MRS. BRADNEY:

"Your daughter and I, as you are aware, have now been engaged for a long time. It is more

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than a year since I have seen her, and as I intend to be in Sand Harbor shortly, I write to ask your permission to call upon her as her accepted and acknowledged future husband.

"Yours faithfully,

"HUGO HESSEMER."

The letter had a malign fascination for her now. She read it again and again, each time lashing herself into fresh agony over the outrageous presumption which had inspired it. But her answer met the case adequately, she thought.

"MR. HUGO HESSEMER,

"*Sir*: If at the end of three or four years you have actually proved yourself to be all that you apparently presume yourself to be now, I may then possibly consider your fitness for a marriage with my daughter. But until then I must refuse any further consideration of the matter. Yours truly,

"ORELLA BRADNEY."

Of course, she did not mention this correspondence to Hilary. But, naturally enough, the girl did not long

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remain in ignorance of it. For Mrs. Bradney's letter, coupled with the fact that he was at last actually appointed to the professorship which he had been secretly coveting, pricked the young lover into immediate plans for that which he had hitherto regarded only as the fleeting fabric of vague, delicious dreams.

"I have written again to your mother," he wrote, "and have told her that unless she will give me the opportunity of meeting you openly in your home, without any resort to clandestine stratagems, I shall put an end to this unbearable situation by taking you away with me, my wife, when I come to Sand Harbor. My darling, it would be hard for you, not what you have been used to, but if love can atone—"

Ah, the cherished sweetness of those letters! Into the arid unloveliness of

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the girl's life there flooded now all the intoxicating tender madness of a lover's ecstasy, and what chance had the poor battling mother against the radiant glow which melted all the bonds she had spent a lifetime in forging about her child?

And yet Hilary had never longed for her mother's affection and sympathy as she did now, since there had arisen in her life this new supremacy with all its sweet coercive mystery. It had come upon her so silently, so suddenly, and she had striven at first to ignore it, and then she had toyed with it, refusing to believe that she need ever take it seriously.

But all the time she had vaguely known herself in the grip of a power stronger than her own purposes; and now with Hugo's firm resolve staring her in the face, she knew that the parting of the ways had come, and she

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grew sick and white with helpless misery. For until this trouble her mother had always obtained from her the unquestioning obedience of a child unawakened to a consciousness of its own separate selfhood, and the habit of a lifetime died hard.

After this the days fairly flew, until winter lay white upon a dead world, and Laurie Bell celebrated his birthday in a blizzard which drove the furious spray-horses far up on the bleak shore. To his family it seemed an event of great importance, but he himself thought little of it, though he took to the drum presented to him by Mrs. Bradney in honor of the occasion, with an ability which his father afterward regretted.

But even a blizzard has its fitting limitations, and to one young man, stiffly breasting its fury on his way to the parsonage, it might have been but

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the light breath of spring among the fluttering blossoms. For the marriage joy was in his heart; the entrancing dreams of his loneliness were about to make themselves real in his life. As he strode along his thoughts crowded back over the far years, and it seemed to him in his covetous remembrance of Hilary that he had always loved her, and he wondered how there ever could have been a time when he had not consciously known it.

Jeanie admitted him to the parsonage grudgingly. Indeed, he thought she must have taken his measure for the exact crack of entrance allowed him.

"Mr. Bell? No, sir; he's not at home. And I don't think, he will be—not for an hour, anyway," added Jeanie, unwillingly truthful upon reflection. "Mrs. Bell? Yes, sir; I *think* you can see her."

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"It's him," she announced, importantly, to Mrs. Bell. "And he'll see you."

Her face was purple with excitement, for it meant a great deal to Jeanie to have been face to face with the "villain" of the most notable love-story Sand Harbor had ever known.

"Him!" Jeanie's look was portentous, and Mrs. Bell violently revised in her mind every male she could think of, from Satan down to the senior deacon. "Now, Jeanie—"

"Yes, ma'am; but his looks is deceivin'. I'll say that."

"Jeanie, who is the—"

"Oh, he's brave-lookin'. I'll not deny it. But Dutch—ugh!" Jeanie looked as if she had just stepped on a cockroach.

"Oh!" There was a world of comprehension in Mrs. Bell's voice. "Yes, Jeanie; but he's not 'Dutch,' as you call

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it. He's an American, which, you know, you are not, and which everybody else knows who hears you talk."

"I am sorry my husband is not at home," said Mrs. Bell, presently, eyeing the young man with interest. "Do you wish me to give him some message?"

"Yes, I think so. Will you ask him—my errand is—" He hesitated in sudden embarrassment.

"Something to do with Miss Bradney."

Mrs. Bell found it quite impossible to resist the temptation of venturing this remark.

"Yes. I wanted to ask Mr. Bell to officiate at the marriage of Miss Bradney and myself on Wednesday afternoon."

"Where?" inquired Mrs. Bell, pointedly.

The young man's face colored hotly.

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"I don't know. We never thought about that. I will let you know."

Mrs. Bell ruminated a moment. Then she said:

"It's dreadful, you know. I don't see how you're going to be happy. For, after all, your mother is always your mother."

"Well, I should say she was!"

"Oh! I mean her mother is. Of course, it's all wonderful to you both now, but don't you see, there may come a time—oh! why do you want to marry Miss Bradney, anyway?" concluded Mrs. Bell unexpectedly, and as she realized a moment later, quite idiotically.

"For the same reason, I suppose, that your husband wanted to marry you," replied the young man, promptly, albeit a trifle stiffly.

Such a pretty little flush dawned in Mrs. Bell's cheek.

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After all, though she was sure that her sympathies all belonged to Mrs. Bradney, Mrs. Bell could not help thinking, as she studied Hugo Hessemmer, that it would be strange if the girl he elected to love did not love him in return.

"Can't you tell me about it," she said, impulsively. "I'm sorry for all of you, but I know too little about it to be any help to any of you now. Mrs. Bradney has never even mentioned the matter to me, and though I have often felt sorry for Miss Bradney, yet I did not know what to say."

It was the first sympathetic remark the young fellow had heard in his home town about his turbulent love affair, and his heart melted to this winning little woman; and he told her his story simply, but so effectively, that when Mr. Bell reached home he was met at the door by a flying little

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fury with a mouth full of indignation.

"Oh, Douglas, he's been here! Oh, you'll just like him! He's a fine fellow. Why, Hugo Hessemmer, of course. It's been awful. They want you to marry them on Wednesday afternoon. That poor girl! It's just because she can't stand it any more. They don't really want to get married now, you know."

"Dear me! How remarkably self-sacrificing of them to do it, then."

It is perhaps a fact that a woman can be enthusiastic over any marriage; a man only over his own.

"Yes, it's like this, Douglas. Mrs. Bradney won't let him call there—or anything, you see."

"Thou shalt not call. Thou shalt not kiss," repeated Mr. Bell, pensively.

"No, Douglas, that's not nice of you. That's always the way with a

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man—a married man. And after the way they once talked, too!"

But while they were still warring on this point, Jeanie ushered Mrs. Bradney in upon them.

"Has Hugo Hessemer been here to ask you to marry him to my daughter?" she asked, without any preliminary conventions whatever.

"Yes, he has," admitted Mr. Bell, slowly.

"Then I absolutely forbid your doing any such thing." Mrs. Bradney's eyes snapped.

"Will that prevent the marriage?" asked Mr. Bell, quietly.

"No, I suppose not. But I don't choose that the minister of my church should perform any such ceremony as that."

"Your daughter is a member of my church. And if she is determined to get married, Mrs. Bradney, do you

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consider that I should be doing my duty in turning her out, for the most sacred ceremony of her life, to any stray minister she might thus be forced to accept?"

"Very well," said Mrs. Bradney, fiercely, as she swept out. "I had expected something better of you than this. It is a fine example of obedience to their parents to encourage in our young people."

She had been gone from home such a little while that Hilary had not guessed her absence; and when she returned to the sitting-room, they passed the long evening together in their accustomed silence until the girl rose to go upstairs. She half crossed the room, then she turned back, with a beseeching look at her mother. But Mrs. Bradney was absorbed in her book. Something in it amused her, and she smiled, at least her lips did.

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"Mother," said Hilary, in a trembling voice, "would you object to my being married here on Wednesday afternoon?"

Mrs. Bradney carefully finished her sentence, then she looked up, with the dazed expression of a preoccupied person.

"What was it you said, child? I really didn't hear." Yet every word had fallen on her heart like a drop of liquid fire.

"Would you object if I were married here, mother?" Hilary's voice was barely audible now.

"I? object? Of course not, my dear. Why should I? Certainly, be married here, by all means, if it suits you."

Hilary broke into sobs, and turned away. But at the door her mother's voice held her.

"Let me see. The father's dead, isn't he? but hasn't the boy an old

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mother? Why, yes; I remember her years ago; quite a tidy-looking person. I dare say she's fond of this boy of hers, poor thing, and would like to see him married. I should think you would ask her in, Hilary."

"I would never ask her here, mother, unless I was certain that she would be treated respectfully," said Hilary, choking back the sobs in her throat.

"I really don't know just who would trouble themselves to treat her disrespectfully, Hilary, and as she need be here only about fifteen minutes, I don't quite see how any one would have a chance."

Hilary broke into a passion of tears, and went on to her room. She could hope for no relenting after this. Death itself could not have parted her from her mother as they were parted now.

The next afternoon she went into

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the town to make some last purchases, and on her way home Hugo overtook her. As they walked up the hill together, Mrs. Bradney was driven toward them, splendid and solitary among her piled-up furs. But as she was swept past them her face wore the cold impersonality of a sphinx.

That night Hilary could not sleep. Her mind was tense with the awe of coming change. After all, would he always love her? And why had he loved her to begin with? She could find nothing in herself to justify his passion. Would he not some day find that out, too? Her heart revised the memory of her mother's tenderness in the long years before this other love had come to claim the supreme place in her life, and it seemed to her that her mother had never been so dear to her as she was now, in this

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moment of their bitterest estrangement.

And yet, how well she realized the irrevocableness of her detachment from the home around which her interests had always centered until now. Already she had found herself looking at her room from distant eyes, wondering how it would seem when her presence had become but a memory within its silent walls.

As she lay there, thinking, she was startled by a sound which repeated itself insistently in her ears—a sharp, passionate sound, broken by smothered moans. She stepped impulsively across the room to the door which separated her from her mother; but though she stood there a long time trembling in the darkness, shivering with a terror which was partly shame that she should hear at all, yet she dared not go in; and when at last she

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crept back into bed again, she felt as if she had received an agonized baptism into her mother's grief.

But the next afternoon at five o'clock she was married to Hugo Hessemer; and though at the last moment Mrs. Bradney came into the room, and stood there, pale and proud, during the ceremony, yet even when Hilary kissed her at parting, blind with the tears which came so fast, the mother's still face betrayed no pang.

On their way to the depot they stopped to say good by to the "boy's old mother." She had been eagerly awaiting them, and drew them into the house, with tender words of greeting, which, under the stress of her emotion, lapsed every now and then into the German of her childhood.

"Ach, meine liebe," she said to

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Hilary, "I speak, also can I think in English, but I feel in German. Look once! I have been keeping the sacred time all to myself." She point 'to the Bible lying open on the table, the yellow little old Bible out of which she had learned "Der Herr ist mein Hirte," long ago when she was a merry little maiden among the purple vineyards of the Rhine. She looked with wistful eyes at her boy's fair young bride, and then laying her worn hands on his broad shoulders, she said, with tender solemnity:

"Mein Hugo, you do take her young life into your care. What the mutter has always been to her, must you now be, but yet more. Hugo, I once had a little mädchen of my own, but God took her. I have thought to-day how it would be if this was my Elsa's marriage. And I know what I for her would ask. My boy, it is not

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only love—a woman must have honor from her husband."

Then with a quaint, appealing gesture she turned to Hilary.

"My dear, he is all I have; I give him to you."

The girl bent impulsively to kiss her with eyes full of tears; and then looking at the homely old face, so beautiful in expression, she did not wonder that she had loved the son of such a mother.

And afterward, among all the angry, jarring memories of her marriage, Hilary counted as its consecrating moment the mother's tender benediction to them in parting: "The Lord bless thee and keep thee; the Lord cause His face to shine upon thee, and give thee peace."

As it grew dark the wind rose, and the snow flew like chaff before the

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sweeping gusts. The streets were deserted, for it was a night when the meanest home seemed a haven.

And as the mistress of the Hill House toiled by, on her long, lonely way to the depot, she caught glimpses of happy families and blazing hearths, and the sounds of simple homely joys smote her ear with cruel significance. She was fiercely thankful for the storm against which she fought her way, for its fury was her protection against prying eyes and bitter tongues. Already in the echoing distance she heard the swelling whistle of the train, and she spurred her wearying steps into reckless haste. Oh, why had she not thought of it sooner!

But she was there at last, and shrinking like a frightened shadow into the shrouding darkness of the depot, she waited for the last glimpse of her child.

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The long, cruel lines thundered beneath the nearing train; the waiting-room door was flung open, and Hilary stepped into the broad band of yellow light. Beyond, in the darkness, the fierce mother-eyes greedily licked up the smile with which the girl lifted her happy face to meet her proud young husband's glance as he handed her up the steps; and then the child was gone, away into a strange new world of her own, in which her mother had no place.

The next morning, Vandelia, bustling into the sitting-room to open the windows to the dull, belated dawn, found Mrs. Bradney on her knees before the dead fire, staring with glassy eyes at the blackened remnants of a pair of baby's shoes.

She had burned her child's past behind her.

CHAPTER VII

"Laurie, Laurie!" cried Mrs. Bell, anxiously. "Laurie, where are you?"

But the prudent Laurie made no reply, and then Mrs. Bell knew that he was engaged in criminal pursuits.

"I quite suppose he's in the pansy-bed again," thought Jeanie, as she viciously kneaded the bread. "But I know I shan't mention it."

Yes, there he was, seated in the very midst of it, with forlorn rows of uprooted pansies all around him, which he had begun rapidly to replant root end up as soon as he heard his mother's voice. When he looked up and saw her beside him, he began to cry.

"I ain't naudy boy; I ain't durdy boy," he wailed, all the time crowding

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little heaps of plants back into the ground heads foremost.

This was fearful. For it was not the first time he had done this thing; it was about the five-and-twentieth. Time and time again Mrs. Bell had weakly hoped the pansies would die, and so relieve her of a problem she could not solve; but the persistent little things bobbed into bloom again, apparently under the impression that something very extra was required of them, in return for all the attention they got.

The first time he had pulled them up Mrs. Bell sat down beside him on the grass, and talked beautifully to him about the flower babies, who were trying to grow, and Laurie enjoyed it very much, and was so sweet that she kissed him a great many times.

The second time she was surprised and grieved, and said some things

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which impressed him seriously, and he was *sure* he was going to be good.

The third time she tied him to a tree, close to the suffering pansies, that he might study their wilted aspect, and truly repent, but the rope was long, and he climbed the tree, and played that he was a "father-bird" building a nest, and she was so thankful when Mr. Bell got him down alive that she forgot all about his morals, and Laurie escaped, with a consolingly vague impression that he had been a hero anyway.

The fourth time his mother tied him to his bed, being suddenly convinced that solitary confinement was the thing adapted to his case; but he crawled into bed as far as his captive little leg would let him, and fell asleep, and when she found him there, with his flushed baby face all wet with tears, her heart misgave her, and she

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gently untied the cord and put it far out of sight, and sat down beside him and watched him with tender, brooding eyes until he awoke, with a conscience apparently quite free from any irksome stains of guilt.

"A hipmapossamus," he remarked, with delightful irrelevance to the occasion in hand, "is a big fiss. Poor hipmapossamus! He has to stay in the water all the time, and he gets all soaking wet."

But half an hour later the pansies were all upside down again, and then Mrs. Bell prayed with him. But the effect of that was not just what she sought, for when she got through, Laurie promptly followed her with "Now I lay me down to sleep," in a tone of voice which was a ridiculously exact imitation of her own fervid utterance.

The next time she whipped him.

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She had never expected or intended that any child of hers should be whipped, but she was distracted now by the utter simplicity of the difficulty. Here was a little child who loved flowers, and understood perfectly what he was told about them; and yet she had completely failed thus far to teach him to leave them alone and let them live. She asked several of the mothers in Israel what they would do about it, but beyond shaking their heads portentously and remarking, "Oh, you must really break him of the habit at once, Mrs. Bell," they had nothing vital to offer.

On this particular afternoon Mrs. Beil sat down among the pansies and wept, while Laurie tenderly mopped up her tears with a handkerchief which had certainly seen its cleaner days.

Then a sudden resolve came to her. "I will go up and talk to Mrs. Brad-

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ney about it," she thought. "She has more sense than anybody else."

She took Laurie into the house with her, and stood him with his face to the wall while she got ready. After a while he said to her, with the grave sweetness which always revived hope in her bosom:

"Mamma, does God know what we are thinking about, always, without our telling Him?"

"Yes, Laurie."

"Well, then, mamma, He knows that I thought just now what a very, *very* good boy I am always going to be after this; and I am sure He thinks I ought to be let out of this corner right away, when I *know* I am going to be such a good, *good* boy."

His mother made no reply to this bald suggestion; but it took a great deal to discourage Laurie, and after some further meditation, he remarked:

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"It is so much better to be good, 'cause then your heart beats so smooove and soft."

Mrs. Bell sighed. She felt that it would be much easier to train Laurie up in the way he should go if he had not been quite so much like the little girl who had a little curl.

The continued intimacy between Mrs. Bradney and Mrs. Bell was something which puzzled Sand Harbor a good deal. For somehow it had leaked out that in performing that wedding ceremony Mr. Bell had run directly counter to Mrs. Bradney's express desire; and in the three years following it she had not once crossed the threshold of the church. But to the two women themselves there was no mystery about it. There dwelt always between them the memory of that night when Vandelia had run breathlessly down to the parsonage to say

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that her mistress had lain all day without speaking, or noticing the food which had been offered to her. That was the day after Hilary's wedding, and for once Vandelia was at her wits' ends. She knew Mrs. Bradney's temper too well to risk calling in a doctor on her own responsibility, and as for appealing to any of the old family friends—Vandelia sniffed! What a fine story it would be for the gossips! But there was the minister; he already knew all about it; she could make no mistake in consulting him.

And then Mrs. Bell had said, decidedly:

"I will go back with Vandelia, Douglas."

"You? But what can you do, Betty?"

"I don't know, but I can find out."

When she went quietly into the room Mrs. Bradney turned her eyes upon

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her and looked at her in silence. But at last she said, harshly, "Why are you here?"

Mrs. Bell thought a moment. Then she said, in the most matter-of-fact manner: "I'm sure I don't know. But I do know that for such a capable woman, Vandelia seems to understand very little about sickness. Why, she doesn't appear to have even the apology for an idea. Here I come in and find a whole dinner, rank enough for a day-laborer, waiting for you to devour. Now, you're feverish with that awful cold, and of course you can't eat. But I told Vandelia she could bring up some tea and toast for us both presently, for I haven't had any supper yet. It's certainly much easier to live with things than with people in this world. I wish you could have heard Mrs. De Lent this afternoon. She came in just as we were going to

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sit down to the table. Wouldn't she take supper with us? Oh, no, my dear Mrs. Bell! She would only keep me one little minute. Well, old Father Time would still be in long clothes if Mrs. De Lent's conception of minutes ruled the mathematical destinies of the universe. She had a most extended list of questions to discuss with me. To begin with, she was surprised to find I hadn't joined the club. Why, didn't I know there was nothing so enervating as the club? I said, gravely enough, I was sure there wasn't. Then the choir. Now that woman doesn't know any more about music than a pig does of Sunday. She couldn't tell a note from a fly-speck to save her life; but to hear her talk you'd think she'd been born with a baton in her hand, ready to beat time for Beethoven himself. Trumpet solo by the Angel Gabriel, conducted

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by Mrs. De Lent. That's her idea of heaven, you may be sure. She told me her nature was so perfectly in tune with the music of the spheres that she could no more help singing right than the birds can. After a while it got through my thick intellect what that poor thing wanted. Now what do you suppose?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Bradney, feebly, but there was the faintest smile on her wan face.

"Why, of course she wants to be soprano in our choir. And did you ever have the privilege of hearing her sing? I've never heard a cow sing myself, but isn't there some old English poet who says they do, every Christmas Eve at midnight? Now, my own opinion is that the cow he heard was Mrs. De Lent in a previous incarnation. She told me the other day that she distinctly remembered

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herself two or three thousand years ago. She was a man then, a warrior bold, but she was killed treacherously, stabbed in the back, and she can still feel the point of that cruel dagger as it plunged into her flesh. That accounts for her being so very nervous now. She has never recovered from that shock."

When Vandelia brought in the tea, she was amazed to find the two women laughing.

"And yet," continued Mrs. Bell, "Mrs. De Lent isn't such a bad woman. Twins and poverty might have done a good deal for her; but as it is, she has all the time and money she can use to make a fool of herself with."

So Mrs. Bell rattled on, but before she went home that night she had subtly restored Mrs. Bradney's sense of dignity to the perpendicular, and had forged between them both a bond

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of sympathy which neither ever strained by a spoken word. Not that Mrs. Bradney for one moment misinterpreted Mrs. Bell's attitude as to Hilary's marriage. It is even likely that as time went on she grew to have a quite unconscious satisfaction in this friendship, just because she knew the little woman was such a stanch advocate of her daughter's rights in regard to the man she loved. But they never spoke of Hilary.

"She knows what I think quite well," said Mrs. Bell to her husband; "and she knows I'm right, too. But she wouldn't if we once began to talk about it. Oh, Douglas, you would just die to hear her talk to me about Laurie. She's so anxious for me to be wise about training him."

"So, now, what would you do, Mrs. Bradney?" asked Mrs. Bell that afternoon, after she had stated the case of

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the pansies and herself versus Laurie.
"Why have I failed so utterly to make him obedient? Just in this one thing, though. In every other way he is so good."

They talked it over for a long time, but Mrs. Bell went home feeling that after all Mrs. Bradney's thoughts had been outside the discussion, and that she was not consciously nearer to any solution of her difficulty. But that evening, after they had finished supper, and Laurie had sweetly crooned himself to sleep with his own peculiar version—

"My bonnet lies over the ocean,
My bonnet lies over the sea,
My bonnet lies over the ocean,
Oh, bring back my bonnet to me."

Mrs. Bradney came in, "just for a minute," she said. Her face looked old and strained, and she began to talk at once, rapidly and nervous-

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ly, as much to Mr. Bell as to his wife.

"About Laurie. I've been thinking of it ever since. It worried me. You say you have tried everything to break him of it. Yes; but there is something else. Temptation is a good thing, I suppose, but not under all conditions. A man struggling not to drink—we should not think it a good thing to hem him in with saloons."

"Oh, but that would be giving in to the child," cried Mrs. Bell, instantly foreseeing the end of this line of argument.

An almost imperceptible quiver passed over Mrs. Bradney's face.

"Would it?" she said, wistfully. "Then, my dear, I would 'give in.' Tell him the pansies have gone away; that when he can be good to them, perhaps they will come back."

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At the door she paused a moment to say, in an uneven voice:

"It isn't the pansies, you know; nor even your ideas of right and wrong. It's Laurie himself. Some day you might be sorry that you had kept on forcing an issue which you might have gone around."

"Perhaps she's right," said Mrs. Bell; "but it isn't Laurie or the pansies she's thinking of; it's Hilary."

The next morning, when Laurie went out to play, he came quickly back to his mother with a troubled little face.

"My pansies!" he cried out to her. "Poor pansies all fled away."

"Yes," said Mrs. Bell, gravely. "They're all gone away, darling, because Laurie worried them so. Perhaps, some day, when he is kind and will let them grow, they will

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come back again. But they've all gone away now to try and grow big."

The child looked at her a moment in silence, but the tears began to fill his deep gray eyes. Then with a breaking sob he flew past her, out into the garden again, and threw himself down beside the empty pansy-bed in an agony of grief and regret. But he never destroyed a flower again.

Laurie was very fond of Mrs. Bradney, whom he familiarly alluded to as "Auntie Rell," and Mrs. Bell was sometimes scandalized at the things he said to her; so it was perhaps just as well that she did not hear the very worst of them, for it was only when he was quite alone with Mrs. Bradney that he gave the loosest rein to his thoughts of her.

"You're very old, aren't you?" he said, cheerfully, to her one day.

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"Yes, child," replied Mrs. Bradney, absently.

"Then you really ought to be dead, shouldn't you?" he continued, looking at her with the critical air of a connoisseur in things mortal.

Mrs. Bradney smiled. "Then what would you do? You couldn't come here any more, and you couldn't go 'horse-backing,' as you call it, on Bobby Shafto."

Laurie looked oppressed, and considered the case anxiously.

"Who'll you give this to when you're dead? Haven't you any little boys or girls?" A worried crease appeared between his eyes.

"Yes."

"Boys?"

"No."

"Girls?"

"Yes."

"Heaps of girls?"

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"No."

"Just only one girl?"

"Yes." Mrs. Bradney sat up very straight.

"Where is she?"

"Oh—a long way off."

"Why isn't she here?"

"Why, because she has her own home, child."

"Oh! She's a bachelor, then," cried Laurie, with an air of relief. "I know. And lives all alone, like you."

"A bachelor?"

"Yes. Jeanie told me." Laurie wagged his head ponderously, like one in possession of illimitable tracts of knowledge. "A bachelor is a lady who had a wife, but hasn't."

"Oh!"

"Then your little girl is a bachelor."

"No."

"Isn't she? Oh, yes, I'm sure she is." But his tone wavered, and he

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cast visibly about in his little brain for proof positive. "Because — why, Jeanie told me our grocer was a bachelor." He beamed in conclusive triumph upon Mrs. Bradney.

After this he talked a great deal to her about her "little girl," and gradually he became possessed of a series of exquisite confidences about the little Hilary, whose vanished sweetness haunted her mother's heart. Perhaps it was because Laurie had the same appealing eyes and the same sunny hair tossed in clouds about his fair little face that Mrs. Bradney found it natural to talk to him about things which touched the quick of her deepest feelings. Or perhaps it was because the child had a blessed and extravagant belief in her goodness—a belief which was sometimes fraught with the cruellest stings for her.

But behind all her occasional soften-

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ings, and her strange impulse of affection for this little child, she harbored unchanging resentment and bitterness against her daughter, the daughter of these later years, for whose vulgarized life she felt the profoundest contempt. And it was with no little trepidation that Mrs. Bell said to her one day:

"Have you had any news of Mrs. Hessemer lately?"

Mrs. Bradney looked at her for a moment in silence. Then she said, coldly:

"I never have any news of her."

For after the first few months Hilary had grown discouraged at receiving no answers to her patient letters, and so they had ceased long ago. For it was three years now since her marriage.

"Come into the conservatory with me," continued Mrs. Bradney, restlessly. "Brazil has some wonderful new azaleas he wants you to see."

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"Yes, in a minute," said Mrs. Bell. She was dreadfully frightened, but she meant to go on, and Mrs. Bradney waited, feeling as helpless as a caged lion against this determined bit of a woman. "It's like this. I mean, I'm sure Hilary must want you. I should, I know, if I had a mother. Oh, Mrs. Bradney, won't you go to her?"

A deep flush came into Mrs. Bradney's face, and the hands idly clasped in her lap began to tremble. She slightly turned her head, so that her straight profile with its impersonal, cameo-like effect was alone visible to Mrs. Bell. But presently her lips tightened into a hard, unlovely line, and the color faded from her face, leaving it white and cold. Then she turned again to Mrs. Bell.

"Really, if you care to see the conservatory, I think we had better go now."

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But a flame of anger shot up into Mrs. Bell's heart and voice.

"No, I don't want to go now," she said, vehemently. "How can you talk about azaleas, when—when I tell you such a thing as this?" She glared defiantly at Mrs. Bradney. "I'm glad now I haven't got a mother. If she acted like you, I'd—why, I'd just hate her."

And with that she put on her hat, and walked out of the house and back to her home in a wild upheaval of fury and fright, and burst into the study with a force which brought Mr. Bell up standing.

"Oh, Douglas, it's awful! We'll have to go. She'll never forgive me. Oh, why did I do it? But I don't care one bit."

But when she had succeeded in interpreting these ravings to Mr. Bell's understanding, he burst out laughing,

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which was such a relief to her that she cried.

"Why, I think it was great," he shouted. "Bless your dear little heart, Betty! that's just the sort of wholesome truth she's suffering to hear about herself. And as for us—my dear, she'll keep still enough about us, don't you fret. Oh, jiminy! I'd give a dollar to buy top-coats for the Hottentots for a snap-shot of the scene."

It was treacherous weather, and perhaps Mrs. Bell in her excitement had not wrapped herself up sufficiently. That was what Mr. Bell thought when she woke in the night with a pain in her throat, and he got up and dosed her sleepily, and then forgot all about it until he found himself wondering the next morning why Betty didn't get up when the alarm had rung so long ago, and why he was possessed of a boy who would persist in telling him-

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self stories in an oratorical tone of voice, just when his father needed his final nap so badly.

"Shut up!" he remarked, tersely, to Laurie this morning, and Laurie answered, cheerfully: "Yes, papa; and now I'll tell you another story. Once a little boy's mamma sent him out on an erring."

No doubt Laurie meant "errand," but in his dreams Mr. Bell beheld a very slender herring galloping through the streets, surmounted by a very solid little boy. "But the naudy little boy ran away into the woods to play. And the woods were awful beary and full of buffits and taggers, too. And a great big buffit ran at him and stuck him full of tears with its horns, and so he died. And when his mamma came to find him, there was his dear little dead body lying full of holes."

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There was a long silence after this, designed by Laurie, no doubt, for the moral good of his hearer, until suddenly Mr. Bell's ears were assailed by a series of rat-tat-tats, kept up with maddening regularity.

"Laurie, stop that noise!" he commanded, stormily.

"Yes, but I must fix my shoe, papa. This nail's wearing tracks in my foot."

"Laurie," vociferated Mr. Bell some moments later, "if you don't stop that hammering pretty soon, I'm coming over there to hammer you."

"Now, papa," protested Laurie, in mildest complaint, "if you would only not use up all my strength 'splaining why I can't stop, I might have enough left to stop with."

"Well, I guess I'll go asleep again," he announced presently. Then, some moments later, "Papa, is it best to go

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asleep, or to wait until you fall asleep?"

As he got no answer to this question, he climbed out of his crib, and pattered coldly over the floor to his parent.

Laurie's crib was familiarly alluded to by the family as the "pen." It had been built in his vigorous infancy by a local carpenter, who had received liberal instructions to create a structure out of which no able-bodied child should be able to escape. When it was brought home Mrs. Bell had seemed somewhat astonished at the literal manner in which her instructions had been fulfilled, and had even gone so far as to ask the perplexed architect if a ladder went with it.

"Oh, I wouldn't bother about that, Betty," said Mr. Bell, reassuringly; "for if he should ever set fire to himself, it would really be much quicker

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to pour water in on top of him, instead of merely trying to get him out."

"But I don't see why he should want to set fire to himself," objected the architect, bluntly.

"Oh, the natural depravity of the human heart comes in there," rejoined the minister, sadly; and then the man, who was made of fine theological stuff, smiled appreciatively. The first time Laurie had succeeded in effecting an escape from his "pen," after a vast amount of creaking and scraping and puffing and groaning, he celebrated his victory by a triumphant little howl: "Oh, I get out of bed I-self! I get out of bed I-self! I getting quite a big man now. But, oh dear! I 'fraid I a very little big man."

Mrs. Bell thought that very "cute," but as Laurie's agility steadily increased, she came to the conclusion that the despised domestic architect

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knew more about the inherent possibilities of a boy's legs than she had given him credit for.

"Papa," now shouted Laurie, seductively, straight into Mr. Bell's ear, "move over! I want to get into bed with you."

"Oh, keep off! Go to sleep! Leave me alone! Get away! Schnr-r-r," groaned Mr. Bell, dozily.

Laurie stood silent a moment, amazed at the nature of this remark. Then he stamped his bare little foot, and exclaimed, vehemently: "Papa, you're what I call a beastly man!" And having thus effectively freed his mind, he began to weep.

But what was the matter with Betty all this time? She took no notice of Laurie's wails, and at last Mr. Bell, roused into sudden remembrance of her complaints during the night, sat up and looked at her.

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Twenty minutes later he was on his way to the doctor's, and in an hour or so a big red diphtheria card was tacked up outside the parsonage.

Laurie was promptly banished below stairs, and Mr. Bell put in a day of eager care for his wife, to be followed by a long, lonely night of anxiety, for it had been found impossible as yet to get a nurse, owing to the epidemic of the disease in town. The next morning he could not help seeing that Mrs. Bell was much worse, and just as he was wondering desperately what he should do, Jeanie ran up to tell him that Mrs. Bradney wished to see him.

As he closed the door gently behind him, he found himself face to face with her.

"Oh, why didn't you send for me yesterday? I only heard of it just now. Now, where shall I begin first?"

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It seemed to him that she began everywhere at once, for in an incredibly short time she had the whole thing reduced to a system. Laurie and Jeanie were both sent to the Hill House.

"Oh, yes, Jeanie must go, too," she said, decidedly. "I dare say she and Vandelia will hitch together like oil and water, but you and I can't help that, and Laurie must have Jeanie. Besides, we don't want a creature here that we can get along without. Brazil will bring our meals down to us, and wait and take the dishes back."

Seeing Mr. Bell's evident astonishment at the magnitude of her arrangements, she said to him, sharply:

"Have you ever been through this thing? No; well, I have—twice; and I know the meaning of it. It's unfortunate that Mrs. Coddle is engaged,

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but I am sure Mrs. McAlpine will come, as a favor to me. But it will take the three of us to fight this thing out to the finish."

CHAPTER VIII

At the end of three terrible weeks of suspense Jeanie one day brought Laurie down to the parsonage, and his mother was permitted to kiss him through the window-pane. They dabbed away joyfully at each other in the intervals of a screeching conversation.

"This snow's very stale, mamma. Why, the crust on it is as *hard*! Did you know I have a very important 'gagement for this afternoon? Vandelialia's going to take me for a sleigh-ride. She's going to drive, you know. She's a very smart woman. I heard the butter-woman say so to Brazil. My kitty's got such human eyes, mamma; just like yours. I'm going

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to call my boat the 'Walbash.' That sounds so nice and swushy, like a boat ought to. Vandelia might have got married, of course, but the butter-woman says she just *despises* the men, the hull kitten caboodle on 'em. What does that mean? I asked Vandelia, and she was mad, but she said she could have had 'em by the half-dozen just the same."

But in the midst of these confidential shrieks a little wave of homesickness suddenly swept over Laurie's heart, and he wailed forth, "Oh, mamma, I want to kiss you on your own dear lips so badly." Then Jeanie led him hurriedly away, for Mrs. Bell was still too near the danger-line to bear the least excitement, but she watched him eagerly while Brazil enthroned him on Bobby Shafto's patient spine; and the procession at last moved off, with Laurie vehemently kissing his

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mittens to her until he was out of sight.

Certainly he was having a good time. So was everybody else at the Hill House, even Vandelia, who had secretly come to the temperate conclusion that if a child had to be a child, he might as well be as near like Laurie as possible. Not that she ever admitted such an opinion to Jeanie, whom she exasperated nearly to the murder mark by always calling "Jane." They passed days together without speaking to each other except through the medium of the innocent little third party.

"Laurie, I should think you had better ask Jane to get a clean face on you for a change," Vandelia remarked, cuttingly, at the dinner-table; and by way of getting even, Jeanie replied at supper-time, "Laurie, I wouldn't eat too many of them peaches. Vandelia

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cans 'em in turpentine, and you'd explode for a long time afterward, if you went too near the fire."

"Canned turkentine," repeated the wondering Laurie in alarm.

"Yes, turpentine," said Jeanie, decidedly. "Some likes it in paint, and apperiently some likes it in peaches. But I know your pore mother wouldn't like it in you."

Both Jeanie and Vandelia were Presbyterians, but unfortunately not of the same stripe; so that it would have been much pleasanter for both of them if the other had been a heathen. As an Eskimo, Vandelia's heart would have warmed towards Jeanie, and as a Fijian, Jeanie would have offered both hands to Vandelia, with a Mother Hubbard in one and the Westminster creed in the other.

Vandelia took great pride in her liberality of thought; she despised

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Jeanie's narrow-mindedness. Jeanie groaned over Vandelia's godlessness, and pointed the moral of every little tale she told Laurie with a pin, subtly designed to prick Vandelia's hardened heart.

For, like every child, Laurie was very fond of Bible stories, and Jeanie related them to him with a wealth of faith and detail which wore on Vandelia's improved intellect.

"Yes, darling; Eve was lovely before she et the apple. We had a picture of her at home, in the big Bible."

"Photograph, darling," mimicked Vandelia. "Genuine snap-shot."

Jeanie hunched her shoulders contemptuously, and went on with her tale.

"She had lovely blue eyes, and beautiful, fair hair, hanging all down to her feet, like ropes of gold, and—"

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"Well, now I'd just like to know, Jane Buchan, how you can have the conscience to sit there and tell that poor innocent boy such tales as that about a woman who lived millions and millions of years ago—"

"Oh, oh!" interrupted Jeanie, strongly. "When the Bible says—"

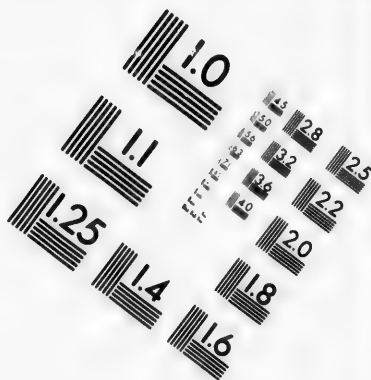
"When we don't know what color her hair was, nor even whether she had any hair, or whether she wasn't all hair, which is much the most likely thing of all," pursued Vandelia, relentlessly.

Jeanie looked horrified.

"Why, Vandelia Crane! And haven't we got the exact picture of Eve, right there in our family Bible, now?"

Vandelia's face was a triumph of stage emotions.

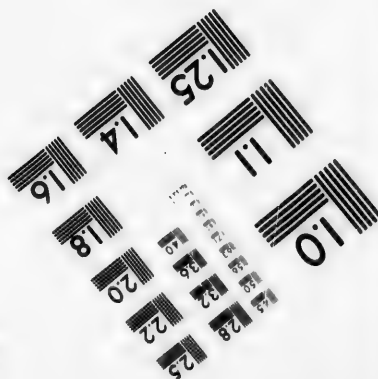
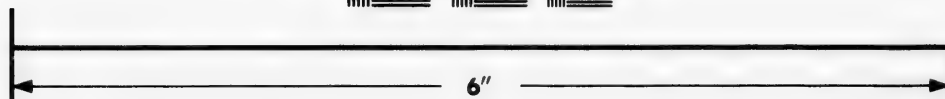
"Oh, the poor little ignorant simpleton! Why, child, where do you sup-



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pose the man who printed your Bible got his picture of Eve, anyway?"

Jeanie had never thought of this.

"Why, just where he got the rest of it," she said at last, indignantly.

"And where'd he get that?"

This was a poser. Jeanie therefore took refuge in personality, like most of her theological predecessors.

"Vandelia Crane," she said, with impressive solemnity, "there's a verse in the Bible that says, 'And without are dogs.' Now, it's among them that you'll be when the gates are shut, I can tell you that."

But after all, when Mrs. Bradney came home, and Jeanie went back to the parsonage, Vandelia really missed her, and she was very fair in her final opinion.

"That Jeanie's just as impudent as a fly on the end of your nose. But then she's just as smart, too. And

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as for taking good care of that boy! Why, she acts as if the whole world was one big orange, created a-purpose for him to suck. And she ain't happy one blessed minute if he ain't squeezing all the juice there is out of the occasion."

Mrs. Bradney smiled. She had in mind Jeanie's remarks to Mrs. Bell only half an hour before. "Oh, that old maid, Vandelia, ma'am! Her bite ain't near as poisonous as you'd think from her bark; but my! she don't know no more about training children than I do about teaching alleygaiters how to fly."

Which seemed plainly to imply that, by contrast, Jeanie considered herself a whole Pestalozzian-Froebel outfit.

Mrs. Bradney seemed justified in concluding that Laurie had at least had the opportunity of having a good time. But he was not to return home for at

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least two weeks yet, not only for his own sake, but also for his mother's.

"Oh, yes, you're all right now," said Mrs. Bradney to Mrs. Bell; "and I know Jeanie will take good care of you. But you're not going to have that boy back until you are quite strong again."

Mrs. Bell's face quivered.

"Oh, don't go yet. There is something I must tell you. I'm so sorry. I said awful things to you. And Dr. Bond says I should have died if it hadn't been for you. Why, think of what you've done for me!"

Mrs. Bradney studied her in silence. Then she said, with an edge of sarcasm in her voice: "My dear, be honest. Why don't you say you're sorry you had to say such things?"

But then, without giving Mrs. Bell time to answer, she bent over and kissed her gently, and went away.

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She had never kissed an alien woman in her life before.

Like many people who have brought up one child, and that a girl, Mrs. Bradney was quite sure she knew all about "children." Consequently, the next two weeks were rampant with surprises for her. When she and Laurie sat down to their first meal together she had a moment's embarrassment. She was very anxious to do the proper thing by him, and she was certain that he must be accustomed to the formality of a "blessing" in his own home. But as if in magic divination of her predicament, Laurie chirped out blithely:

"Oh, Auntie Rell! I'll ask the biessing."

"Very well," she answered, with a prudent air of concession; and instantly, with the gusto of a cannonball in quest of its goal, he burst out:

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"Lord, bless to us what now we *like*, to do us good, for Jesus' sake, Amen."

She was quite sure that through the half-open door she heard Vandelia strangle a giggle in the kitchen at this neat intimation of Laurie's, and she heard another when he fixed her with his eye, and remarked, sweetly:

"I'm not a bit bread-and-butter hungry, Auntie Rell, but, oh! I'm awful cooky hungry."

Vandelia beamed upon him. She could not resist this tribute to her genius, for she did consider herself a "dabster" in the cooky line. But Mrs. Bradney said, kindly:

"Yes, I dare say, Laurie; but Vandelia has a boiled egg for you now."

"Yes; but it doesn't seem to me I want an egg—not now," he added, with a provisional eye for future needs. "Besides, I'm sure Vandelia boiled this one upside down."

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This objection occurred to him suddenly, and he evidently expected it to prove insurmountable; but Mrs. Bradney beguiled him, and at length he consented to eat the despised egg. But not until he had extracted from her a promise that he should have a "sample" of everything on the table. While he ate it he discoursed on the subject of eggs in general.

"Turkeys lay eggs. We et our last turkey. It was full of turkey-bread, but Jeanie put that in. I saw her. But the next turkey we get, I'm going to coax mamma to keep him in the yard and have him lay eggs."

"Vandelia, will you pass the olives, please," said Mrs. Bradney.

"The man that sold that turkey to mamma, Auntie Rell, said it was a very, very good turkey indeed, and that if we found it wasn't pure turkey all the way through, we could give it

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back to him after—after—” Laurie hesitated, vaguely conscious of some difficulty here, and then discreetly shifted his cargo of conversation to another track.

“Ants lay larvas, anyway,” he announced, with the firmness of conviction. “I know, for the book mamma reads to me says so. And I think the pointed-back ones are queens. But it’s better not to be sure.”

Mrs. Bradney laughed suddenly.

“Child,” she exclaimed, “how you manage to eat so much and say so much at one and the same time, I can’t think.”

“Can’t you? Why, it’s easy, Auntie Rell.” He studied her seriously for a moment, and then said, with the inconsequent directness which she found so paralyzing:

“Are you all over blood inside?”

“Why yes, child. Yes, I suppose so.”

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"I am," he remarked, gravely. "It's red, you know. What's yours? I thought perhaps you were all bones inside. You don't look bloody."

Vandelia choked as she passed the hot biscuits. It struck her as irresistibly funny to hear her mistress's in and out sides discussed with such freedom.

"Pigeons lay eggs, too, but their eggs are nearly always males or she-males. Oh, yes, they are. Anyway, the Science Primer says so."

He had finished his egg now, and he pushed his saucer away. Then he carefully scanned Mrs. Bradney's plate.

"What are you eating, Auntie Rell?"

"Ham."

"Ham? What's it made of?"

"Pork."

"Pig pork?"

He spoke with the critical air of one

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who was up to a thing or two, and not likely to be deceived by a bogus article.

"It really 'ooks quite nice," he remarked, condescendingly. "Please give me too much."

He was provided with an ample plateful of provender, and there actually was silence for nearly sixty seconds.

"I think I'll take another plum, please, Auntie Rell. This one is bad."

"Plum? Oh! an olive. Why, certainly, dear. I'm sorry that one's not good."

"But this one's bad, too," he said presently. "Very, very bad."

And it was not until four "bad" olives were ranged upon his plate that Vandelia grasped the situation, and exclaimed, feelingly:

"Land of Goshen, child! They're all bad. It's the nature of 'em. Didn't you ever eat 'em before?"

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"No, Vandelia, and I never will again," he said, firmly. "I feel like paint and oysters all over inside."

After he had drunk a great deal of hot milk and water, and was partially convalescent, he asked, abruptly:

"Does Vandelia ever make scarlet roosters for supper, Auntie Rell?"

Mrs. Bradney looked really amazed.

"Scarlet roosters?" she repeated, faintly.

"Yes; Jeanie does. Mamma showed her how. She always makes six. Then I have two."

"Six scarlet roosters! And you have two?"

"Why, of course, Auntie Rell. But Mrs. Bond buys hers. In a box, you know. At De Spelder's."

"For the love of anything, ma'am! It must be Charlotte Rootches he means," put in Vandelia, who had been hovering about, green-eared at

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this recital of Jeanie's culinary feats. "Flummery kickshaws, I should call 'em."

"Would you?" said Laurie, in astonishment. "I don't believe they'd know what you wanted, Vandelia. But do you think if I planted this stone, Auntie Rell, it would grow up cooked peaches? 'Cause the stone's cooked, you see."

"Well, child, I wish it would," sighed Vandelia.

"What do you do, Auntie Rell, when chickens won't lay their eggs in their nests?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Laurie."

"Oh, I do. You ought to put a nice smooth egg made of white wood in the nest. Then the next time the chicken came by he would look in and say, 'Why, some other people have been here laying eggs, and now I needn't mind.' "

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Mrs. Bradney laughed.

"Oh, but Brazil told me that," expostulated Laurie, evidently feeling that her amusement cast a slur upon the statement.

"Well, it doesn't sound just like Brazil," remarked Mrs. Bradney; for Brazil was a painfully exact and unimaginative person whose own mental processes could be no more obscure to the hen than the hen's to him.

The next day was wet, and Laurie could not go out to play. The rain began with a heavy thunder-storm, which delighted him.

"Hooray! listen to that big heaven-cracker!" he shrieked after a most appalling clap right over their heads. "I guess they think up there it's Fourth of July, Auntie Rell."

But when the thunder had exhausted itself the rain kept steadily on, and Mrs. Bradney soon discovered that an

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active boy can wear out more expedients designed for his entertainment in half an hour than six girls could in three weeks.

At last in despair she said to him: "Oh, go upstairs, and fill the bath full of water, if you want to, and sail all the boats you like."

When she went up, after a while, to change her dress, she found him carrying on an active conversation with a toothpick, which was propped up against the tap.

"Do you want to work on my boat?" he inquired, sternly. "Well, are you a member of our church?"

"Don't you think that's a pretty rigorous test of seamanship, Laurie?"

"Oh! but, Auntie Rell, you're bound to have rigging on a ship. Come and look at my boat. She's called the 'Suspender.' She goes beautifully with her sail, when I lead her with a string."

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Mrs. Bradney laughed. "Well, under the circumstances I think the name's first-class, but I suppose you mean 'Defender.' "

Laurie looked aggrieved. "No, I didn't, Auntie Rell. 'Suspender' sounds so nice and — and — sloppy. Don't you see? But look! There's my cropeller," he said, pointing to a soap-dish ambling uncertainly on the face of the domestic deep. "And that's a steam-bard." He was blissfully unconscious of any difference between bards and barges, or tin pie-plates, for that matter.

"But it's hard work making waves, Auntie Rell." He was quite red in the face from his frantic efforts to stir up a satisfactory storm with an egg-beater. "They don't stay made. Do you think God's got a recipe for making His waves, Auntie Rell?"

"I suppose so," answered Mrs.

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Bradney, slowly. She felt as if she would soon have to let out a tuck in her mind to make room for the inconsequent succession of new ideas so swiftly presented to her.

"Can butterflies swim?" he inquired, earnestly. "Pigs can." But while he was waiting for her to adjust her faculties to this transition, the toothpick sailor fell overboard from the slippery deck of the soap-dish into the hydrant sea.

"Well, I am sure you needn't make such a fuss about that," said Laurie, contemptuously, as he rescued him. "Don't you know that John advertised Jesus in Jordan? This ought to be good enough for you."

Just then Vandelia appeared in the doorway. "Land of Goshen!" she exclaimed, severely. "Laurie Bell! And you a minister's son! And not a dry thread on your back!"

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She stamped imposingly around the inundated bathroom, and descanted eloquently on the utter ruin to the splashed-up walls, but she quite ignored Mrs. Bradney. Vandelia was enjoying herself royally. It was so good to be able to tongue-lash her mistress in this safe, second-hand style.

Suddenly she said, in quite an altered tone, and as if she had only that moment become aware of Mrs. Bradney's presence: "Mrs. Oblender is waiting downstairs to see you, ma'am."

Mrs. Bradney melted meekly away.

And then Vandelia sat down and sailed boats for a while.

Mrs. Oblender was very big and very red, and as she talked on and on more and more breathily about the "unheeded whails of the indignant poor," she deepened in tint and swelled in size until it looked positively

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dangerous, and any humane person would almost have been driven to concede her side of an argument in order to save her life.

Mrs. Oblender was very new to Sand Harbor. She was also very new to her position as the wife of a suddenly rich man, and after some rather trying experiments as a social star she had concluded that philanthropy was her forte, and that she could probably make far more noise in the world with less money in that way. So just now she was pronouncing organization with a capital O, and fondly imagining herself the president of a ponderous society for the philosophical study of the poor.

"Oh, yes; I dare say a bureau of charities is a necessity in a large city Mrs. Oblender," said Mrs. Bradney; "but here in Sand Harbor we have every means of knowing our poor and

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caring for them in the simplest and most informal manner. I'm afraid of machinery myself."

Just then the door opened, and Laurie trotted in, dry and decent—in fact, as charming as Vandelia could make him. He climbed into Mrs. Bradney's lap, and clasping his arms around her neck, whispered, stagily:

"Oh, send her away, Auntie Rell; I like you best all to myself."

Mrs. Oblender watched this proceeding in some astonishment. Secretly she stood very much in awe of Mrs. Bradney, but there was certainly no fear about this child, and she found that fact encouraging.

"Come here, dear. What's your name?" she asked, with a wide, thin-lipped smile. "Bradney, I guess. You're just the living image of your grandma."

"No," said the child, shortly.

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"I'm Laurie Bell. That's what God calls me, anyway."

Mrs. Oblender bristled. That was a strange way for a child to talk, she thought. Why, the irreverence of it!

"Oh, the minister's little boy!" She looked at Mrs. Bradney. "Well, I wouldn't go to that church. Why, that young man's positively dangerous. I wonder somebody don't do something about it."

Mrs. Bradney's chin lifted.

"Dangerous?" she repeated. "What to? Really, Mrs. Oblender, you need not be afraid. Dr. Bond says there is not the slightest chance of infection now."

Mrs. Oblender felt a little foolish, and wondered whether she had not better explain that she meant something far more to be dreaded than diphtheria. But Laurie had approached quite near to her, and was looking at her critically.

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He was usually a very polite child, but certainly, as Mrs. Bradney said to Vandelia, damp weather had a very demoralizing effect on him. Mrs. Cblender began to gush over him noisily, but Laurie was not duped, for he had the discrimination which children share with the dog who always knows whether a bone is given to him or thrown at him.

"Are you a white lady?" he asked, unexpectedly. "Because I don't think you are. You look like Jeanie when the poison ivory stung her."

"Laurie!"

"Yes, Auntie Rell, but I want to tell her that I'm going to have a circus when I'm a man. The ladies will sit in the topper seats, and the men in the downer ones. Wouldn't you like to—"

A wild terror seized Mrs. Bradney that he might be going to suggest that

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her visitor should fill the rôle of the Fat Lady from Madagascar, or the Bearded Giantess from Yang-hi-tchoo.

"Laurie," she said, gravely, "ask Vandelia to go up to the garret with you and see if the south end is leaking."

Then she turned to Mrs. Oblender, and said, with a sweetness which sugar-coated all that lady's vague discomfitures:

"I'm sure we have every reason to feel grateful to you, Mrs. Oblender, for the interest you are taking in our people, and I know that your wisdom and experience will suggest to us many improvements on our old-fashioned methods."

Afterward she had a serious little talk with Laurie.

"All right, Auntie Rell; I'll never do it again. But I don't think she's pretty, and why does she wear little

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lanterns in her ears? But I know who is pretty."

"Who?" Mrs. Bradney felt quite interested.

"Vandelia. She's as thin as a pin."

Well, if that was his standard of beauty, Mrs. Bradney felt that Mrs. Oblender's case was hopeless indeed. But alas! It was still raining in heavy, straight lines, and Laurie went over to the window and looked out dolefully. At last he said, in a tone of reproachful remonstrance:

"Now, God, this is the third time to-day that I've asked you to turn off that rain, and you haven't done it yet."

"But just think how good this rain is for the farmers," said Mrs. Bradney.

"But, Auntie Rell, there are a million times more boys in the world than farmers, and I know there isn't one single boy who wants it to rain."

"I know what," said Vandelia, com-

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passionately. "You send Brazil over for his little girl, ma'am. She's a real tidy child, and they'd have the best time together this whole blessed afternoon. There ain't anything quite so entertaining to a child as some other child."

But when little Mary Pinch first found herself in Mrs. Bradney's sitting-room she was speechless with alarm, for her mother had given her so many agonized last directions as to her behavior that she could only helplessly remember that she had forgotten them all. So after several quite ineffectual attempts to thaw her out, Mrs. Bradney went away. Perhaps if they were left alone a while the two children would do something besides stare at each other.

"What's your name?" inquired Laurie the moment the door was shut.

"Mary Pinch."

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"Mary Pinch. Pinch—like that?"

"No, like that," retaliated Mary, promptly delivering a punch, under which Laurie sat down quite unexpectedly to himself.

"Now you've broken my skeleton all to bits," he wailed; but Mary looked coldly unconcerned, and then he asked, reproachfully:

"Are you a girl?"

"Yes, I am."

"Don't you wish you were a boy?"

"No, I don't," retorted Mary, with unmistakable indignation.

"Well, I do. You'd know so much more about 'lectricity."

"No, I shouldn't. I'd be ashamed to," said Mary, severely.

"Well, when I get up to heaven I'm going to have four legs," announced Laurie, with a lightning change of subject. "Two to walk with, and two to kick with."

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"Then you'll look just like a dog," said Mary, scornfully.

"Well, I don't care, Mary Pinch. In your last incrownation you were only an old pig, anyway."

This remark was the baneful result of an innocent discussion on theosophy between Mr. and Mrs. Bell, in which Laurie's ears had evidently played an absorbing part.

Mary moved toward her hat.

"I guess I'll go," she said, with dignity.

Laurie looked anxious. "If you stay, I might p'r'aps tell you the story of Jonah of Arc. Auntie Rell read it to me."

"I don't know," said Mary, weakly. "Auntie Rell" and "Jonah of Arc" were equally unknown characters to her, but she had a thirst for knowledge, and this mouthing of great names had its effect upon her. But

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she wouldn't let Laurie suspect that for anything.

"Oh, I don't care about that. I've got a lovely cat. It's called Grandma."

"Huh! I've got two. Vandelia got them for me. One's called Circe, and one's called Esau. Esau's called Esau because he was Jacob's brother, you know; and Circe—well, Circe's called Circe—because—oh! Ulysses knew all about Circe, anyway."

"Do they scratch?"

Laurie nodded vigorously, and looked tenderly at one finger.

"See that flustering? That's where Esau scratched me. Auntie Rell put gasoline on it."

"Vaseline," said Mary, with the contempt of infinite knowledge.

"Yes, but have you ever had your picturegraph taken, Mary?"

"No; but I can spell Con-stan-sty-no-ble."

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"Well, I used to could," said Laurie, with the air of one who was sure he must have forgotten more than Mary ever knew. "But I think we'd better play soldiers now," he added, quickly. "I've got a sword and a snap-sack. I'll be the Newnited States and you can be Spanish, and I'll kill you with the sword."

But there was a long argument about that, and it was only settled finally by their arranging to take turns at being the slaughtered Spaniard. Then another storm arose over the soldier's belt, which Mary monopolized entirely, it being altogether too small for Laurie's aldermanic proportions.

"Well, what do you mean by being so fat, and then fussing about it so?" she inquired, indignantly. "You ought to be ashamed. Why, your waist is bigger than my pa's, and he's forty-one years old."

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"Now, see here, Mary Pinch, you're feeling too homely in this house, and—and—I knew your father before you did, anyway," said Laurie, groping for a suitable insult, and not at all caring whether it adhered to the subject under discussion or not.

"Why, for the land sake!" exclaimed the six-year-old Mary, in strong tones. "I knew him when he was a little boy."

"Yes, but I knew him up in heaven, before he was borned down here," declared Laurie, stoutly. "He had wings on then. I wonder how they get wings on."

These flights into the supernatural were too much for Mary, but by way of retaliation she picked up the belt, and began cruelly to crowd Laurie into it. But even the strength of revenge was unequal to the task, and Laurie wailed with mortification.

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"Oh, dear! I wish there wasn't so much of me, Mary. Is it because I eat too much?"

"Why, of course it is," said Mary, disdainfully.

"Well, if that don't beat all," remarked Vandelia to herself as she passed through the room. "And your own ma told me only last week that you eat like an elephant, with the digestion of an ostrich, for all that you're such a scrawny little scrimp that decent victuals wouldn't own to feeding you."

However, after Laurie found that a soldier could parade just as noisily in a belt cut from an extra-sized edition of the daily paper, he recovered his spirits, and the massacres proceeded as before until he decided to refresh himself by eating the only apple in sight. This called forth from Mary some distinctly audible remarks about

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"green-eye greedy," which Laurie resented as unmistakably personal, but he finally offered a compromise.

"No, Mary, I can't give you the apple now, because it's all eaten, but you may have the core and the bruise."

Naturally enough, Mary construed this as adding gross insult to injury, and Vandelia hearing the riot from afar, considered it prudent to interfere.

"Can't you two children play together like Christians, without making such an outlandish racket? I guess they can hear you in town."

"Of course we could, Vandelia," answered Laurie, promptly. "But it's so much more inter-rusting not to."

Vandelia went away with a grim smile underneath her judicial severity. "But it don't appear to me children

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talked like that in my day," she mused.

After this dreadfully exciting time, they rested themselves by looking through the "picture-telescope," as Laurie called the kaleidoscope, until he unfortunately nudged Mary on the arm, thereby upsetting a very splendid sunlight sonata in every color at once. Then they slapped each other a little while, until it occurred to Laurie that it would be a pleasing change to play "gurdy-organ," with Mary as instrument and himself as grinder.

That did nicely, until Mary got out of tune from overpractice and Laurie ground her a trifle too heavily in her left side.

But after Vandelia had separated the grinder and the ground, and had restored peace with a couple of cookies, they took a very affectionate farewell of each other.

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"But you know, Mary, I shan't be able to marry you," said Laurie, regretfully.

"Why not?" demanded Mary, indignantly.

"Why, because you haven't got my color hair. People must always marry people with their same hair."

"I don't believe it," declared Mary, earnestly.

"Well, don't get your heart set on it, anyway, Mary, 'cause—'cause—I might see somebody I liked better."

"Then you'll be a mean, greedy boy," screamed Mary out of the darkness into which she was disappearing.

"But I don't care. I'll marry you anyway, whether you want to or not."

"Well, Laurie, did you and Mary have a nice time together?" asked Mrs. Bradney, when he came and nestled up against her.

"Oh, Auntie Rell, we had just a

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beloved time," he answered, with a tired sigh of reminiscence. "It was gorgeant. But do men have to get married whether they want to or not, Auntie Rell? Because, Mary wants me to."

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CHAPTER IX

"I know a baldheaded man, Brazil."

"Do, eh? Who's that?"

"Oh, I can't tell *you*, Brazil. Why, don't you see you're the very one I can't tell?"

"Can't? Well, I'd like to know why."

"Oh, no! Auntie Rell said we simply mustn't talk about other people's looks. Mrs. Oblender's got looks, you know."

"First time I knew it," muttered Brazil.

"Yes; but you must not say so," continued Laurie.

"And I might hurt your feelings,

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you see, Brazil. But I really do know a baldheaded man."

"And yet you won't tell me! Now that's what I call real mean. I guess I won't bother much about saddling Bobby Shafto after this."

"Oh, dear!" Laurie looked sorely distressed. He stood first on one foot and then on the other in an agony of indecision.

At last he said, beseechingly:

"Now, you'll promise not to have your feelings hurt, Brazil?"

"I don't know about that," said Brazil, cruelly. "But I know I'm through with saddling Bobby Shafto."

"My, my!" Laurie wrung his hands. "There's only one way I can tell you. It's this. The next time you look in your looking-glass"—he paused miserably—"you'll know who the baldheaded man is." He shot out the last few words in a frantic whisper.

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Brazil took off his hat, and felt his head meditatively.

"Oh, don't do that!" exclaimed Laurie, anxiously. "It'll hurt your feelings if you do. Besides, when you're a soldier in war, do they give you time to blow your nose, Brazil? Because if they don't, I don't believe I'll be a soldier."

"Bless my braces! If you don't beat a flea at turning a handspring, young feller! First it's heads and then it's noses."

"Yes," said Laurie, sweetly. "But did you ever dream you were anointed king of Israel, Brazil? I did last night. Everybody came to see it—all the heaven people, I mean—and the angels flew around blowing their—"

"Noses?" suggested Brazil, irreverently.

"No, no; their trumpets, Brazil. And God said, 'Hurry up and get

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dressed quick, or you won't see the show.' You never saw such a time. My! It was awful."

"You bet!" ejaculated Brazil, fervently.

"And a little girl up there dropped her heaven spear, and it fell right down on her papa, and killed him dead. My, but he was mad! He went right up to heaven, and punished her severely, Brazil. Why, he—he—cut off her leg."

Brazil looked paralyzed.

"So then she was taken to the Unatic Aasylum, of course. But do you know where liars go, Brazil?"

"Liars?"

"Yes, of course. You know that means you, Brazil."

"Liars, me!"

"Yes, because Auntie Rell says you never told me about the chickens and the wooden eggs, you see."

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"But I did."

"Yes, I suppose you did," said Laurie, calmly. "But you shouldn't have."

"Why not, I'd like to know?"

"Because you must always tell the truth, Brazil."

"But it was the truth," protested Brazil, wildly.

"Yes, I know. But it's wrong to tell lies, isn't it, Brazil?"

Brazil's face was a study. Something was wrong, but his brain refused to grapple with the mystery. He would grapple with Laurie instead. But at this moment Vandelia called Laurie from the porch.

"Laurie, come in to your supper."

"Yes, Vandelia; but I've just eaten four slices of bread to two pieces of cheese, and don't you think that was a pretty good score?"

"Where did you get that, I'd like to know?" asked Vandelia, severely.

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"Oh, I helped myself in the pantry, thank you," said Laurie, cheerfully, as he went indoors.

Brazil sought healing for his outraged feelings by stating his case to Vandelia. But she only laughed.

"'Tain't safe to argue with a child," she remarked, sagely. "You're bound to get left."

"Well, I know one thing," Brazil concluded, finally. "That boy's cut out for a lawyer. He'd muddle you all up in the innocentest way until you'd be beggin' to sign your own death-warrant, with tears of gratitude for the privilege."

It was Saturday evening, and after Laurie had disposed of a supper which threatened his existence, in spite of his continual insistence that he really had no "appetite," a procession was formed for the bathroom, for his ablutions were a serious matter, and

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seemed to demand the united energies of Mrs. Bradney and Vandelia.

"I'll go first with the lamp, and you can carry up that pile of things, Vandelia. Laurie, you can bring up the rear."

But when they were half-way up the stairs Laurie called after them distractedly:

"But where is it, Auntie Rell? I've hunted for it everywhere."

"Where is what?"

"Why the rear, Auntie Rell. You said I must bring it up."

"For creation sake!" ejaculated Vandelia. "Why, you're it yourself, child. Get along."

Laurie sat down and began to unbutton his shoes. But suddenly he looked up, and said, sweetly:

"Here, Auntie Rell, you may take off my shoes. It will give you something to do."

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Vandelia chuckled. If she had not liked the child for anything else, she would have adored him for the manner in which he ordered her stately mistress about.

"Vandelia, did you ever have the measles?"

"Guess so."

"Did they perfumigate you when you were done, Vandelia?"

"Perfumigate me?"

"Oh, yes, they did, Vandelia. Because they was germs sticking all over you. They perfumigated mamma, and they perfumigated me once, too. Only I was so little I can't remember when. But my tempiture was two hundred and fifty."

"Well, for a boy that thinks nothing of a two hundred and fifty tempera-
ture, I must say you're mighty hard
to suit in a bathtub," remarked Van-

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delia presently, in tones of strong exasperation.

Certainly, Laurie was sensitive. The difference of a degree or two in the temperature of the water made a bigger difference than degrees are usually supposed to.

And after that was once adjusted a great fleet of things had to precede him into the bath—the soap-dish, the match-safe, some curiously shaped cardboard, a squadron of toothpicks, and a very handsome man-of-war, which used to be a crumb-tray.

“Do they always call a ship a ‘she’?”

“Oh, yes, I suppose so,” said Mrs. Bradney, vaguely.

Laurie shook his head violently. “No, Auntie Rell, I don’t think so. How could you call a man-of-war she?”

Laurie was a very perishable article.

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In fact, a wax doll would have been vulgarly rugged in comparison. Vandelia had never realized before that a boy could be so frail, but as she circumspectly soaped him here and tenderly mopped him there, she learned a great deal about boys and baths.

"Land of Goshen, child!" she exclaimed at last. "Ain't your skin on tight? A body would think you were afraid it was all going to wipe off."

"Yes, Vandelia; but now you see you've wiped my sweeper right into my eye-shutter." His lashes were very long.

"Now, Auntie Rell, you may scratch me if you want to, but leave the scratch on. Don't rub it off."

How sweet he was, and so full of roguish tricks! But then Laurie was a very handsome child. It was not likely that another in a thousand would be like him. And heredity had

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so much to do with these things. One could hardly expect—

"I think you ought to cut my hair, Auntie Rell. If you don't, it'll all go to seed pretty soon. Is the inside of your head full of hair-seeds?"

"Well, it may be, Laurie; but I have hoped that there was something else there."

"No, I don't think so," said Laurie, judicially. "Because you've got so much hair."

What a sweet, saucy, dimpled thing he was! Well, nearly all children were, for that matter. It was only as they grew older that they lost their charm and hidden flaws appeared.

"Now, Auntie Rell, you're cutting my scratchers off too short. I don't like that one bit."

"But, Laurie, they're like eagle's talons," remonstrated Mrs. Bradney.

Laurie argued the point exhaus-

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tively, and Mrs. Bradney was very glad at last to compromise by leaving one "scratcher" long.

Then he said some very remarkable prayers, which began quite respectably and ended in a free-and-easy fashion, designed to include everything in the universe apparently, from Circe—"but not Esau, because of that scratch"—down to Brazil and the milkman. "And please feed Dandy lots, dear God, so he'll be fat and strong."

"Who is Dandy?" asked Mrs. Bradney as she tucked him up.

"Dandy? Oh, that's my heaven-horse. Didn't you know that, Auntie Rell? I've got lots of heaven-horses, but I like Dandy best."

"I should think you'd like a few of them down here," said Mrs. Bradney, dryly. She felt suddenly malicious.

"Oh, no! They wouldn't like it at

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all down here. It's so much nicer up there."

"How do you know they're up there at all?"

The child looked at her in blank amazement.

"I don't have to know, Auntie Rell. They just are. Why, mamma told me that when you go up to heaven God gives you just what you want to make you happy. And, of course, I couldn't want anything else like I want Dandy, Auntie Rell."

Mrs. Bradney sighed. Her quick malice had died out. This little child's simple faith awoke a hungry ache in her heart.

She put out the light and drew up the shades, and then sat down beside him in the slanting moonlight.

"Can't you sing, Auntie Rell?"

"No, Laurie, I can't."

"Then I must," he said; and forth-

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with began, in a thin, sweet little treble:

"Now the day is over,
Night is drawing nigh;
Shadows of the evening
Steal across the sky.

"Now the darkness gathers,
Stars begin to peep—"

"Yes, Auntie Rell, but I wish somebody would really tell me why the moon shuts up, and what it's stuck on to."

He blew a light kiss to his mother, and after a while Mrs. Bradney heard him whisper softly:

"Good night, Auntie Rell; good night, dear God," and the next moment he was fast asleep.

She sat there beside him for a long time. Sometimes she leaned over and listened to the light rise and fall of his innocent breath. But her thoughts were far away.

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In the night she was awakened by his sharp cry:

"Oh, Auntie Rell, I've got a headache in my tooth! I've got a headache in my tooth! You must go to the drunk-store and get me some medicine."

She drew him in beside her, and pillowed his throbbing little face upon her arm, and after a while he fell asleep again, nestled as close against her as he could creep. But she lay awake, her eyes filled at times with unwilling tears. This child loved her with a most beguiling confidence. That he should love her so appealed in the subtlest way to a certain innocent vanity in her. She had been conscious of growing hard, and of pushing her world farther and farther from her, but there must be something lovable in her still.

And yet, was she going to close her

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heart against that other little one who would have every claim upon her?

In the morning she was confronted with a problem which completely distracted her for a few minutes, especially as she felt herself under fire from Vandelia's keen eye. For it was Sunday, and Laurie always went to church with his mother or Jeanie. So he was adorned in his best, with the general impression that some one would take him. But who? For since Hilary's marriage Mrs. Bradney had never entered the church. Vandelia? Even Mrs. Bradney smiled at the thought of Vandelia consenting to conduct a child to church.

"Brazil wants to know what time he shall have the carriage ready for you, ma'am?" blandly inquired Vandelia, just as she had reached this juncture in her thoughts.

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Mrs. Bradney raised her head proudly.

"At quarter-past ten."

Vandelia retired into the kitchen, and laid her nose reflectively against a cold window-pane.

"Umh!" she said, after a long time. She had been unable to resist the delight of harrying her mistress a little, but she had not expected this.

It seemed to Mrs. Bradney that all the world must be looking at her as Brazil swept up to the church door in his proudest style, but she was brilliantly calm as she walked into the old Bradney pew. Laurie was necessarily in the highest spirits. Only at the last moment had she discovered that he was starting out with a tin trumpet, that he might properly celebrate on the way the glory of driving to church in such style, and it took her quite three-quarters of the service to reduce

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him to anything like a devout frame of mind.

After ten minutes of the most delightful calm, during which she rejoiced to see him actually listening to the sermon, which was more than she could do herself, he leaned toward her and whispered in trumpet tones:

"What makes him talk so long? My legs ache."

It was not Mr. Bell; it was apparently a frightened young theologian of very recent manufacture, who, once started, seemed likely to go on forever from sheer inability to find out how to stop.

She heard suppressed ripples in the pews about her, and by the time the benediction was finally arrived at she felt herself on the verge of nervous prostration. But the people surged about her, and though a delicate tact was certainly not the distinguishing

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feature of some of them, she could not help being touched by their real pleasure at having her among them again.

After a while she missed Laurie, and was advised to look for him in the infant-class room. She sat down and dreamily watched the mob of little tots going through their quaint exercises, until their collection-box was passed, when she was recalled to a very vivid sense of the present by hearing Laurie say, in his sturdy little voice:

"No, Miss Walker, I haven't got any penny to-day. Don't you know my poor papa has to work very, very hard for those pennies?"

Mrs. Bradney laughed, but the teacher looked grave. She was an interesting young being, who had absorbed one great educational principle: never to disturb a child's unconsciousness of himself by so much as a smile at anything he said.

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But her solemnity was an implied disgrace, which Mrs. Bradney found it difficult to sustain, and she hurried away to improve the remaining time by looking in on Mrs. Bell.

"Who preached to-day?" she asked, after she had touched as lightly as possible on her own appearance in church.

"Oh, that's the new young pastor at Rose Park," said Mrs. Bell; "and he needs some one to be kind to him, as you can very well imagine if you know anything about the place. So Mr. Bell exchanged with him this morning."

"Yes; I can imagine that Rose Park might be pretty thorny," said Mrs. Bradney, grimly. "But I thought he must have just escaped from some theological incubator. There seemed to be a good deal of shell still sticking to his back."

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Mrs. Bell laughed. "But he's nice, you know."

"Oh, yes, my dear. So are fresh eggs and spring chickens."

"Mrs. McAlpine was at church, too," she went on presently. "The first time for four years, she told me."

"Poor thing! She's had a hard life," said Mrs. Bell, sympathetically.

"Well, there she was this morning in a new 'bunnet,' and a new gown and shoes and gloves, and she told me that gettin' into heaven would never be any 'graunder' than what she felt when she walked into church with all her new clothes on her back."

Mrs. Bell looked up suddenly. "But how in the world did she get money enough for all this splurge so soon? She told me she would have to wait and see how her garden did this summer."

Mrs. Bradney was excited by her

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morning's experiences, otherwise her usually cool head would have found a way out for her.

"Why, what I gave her—" then as Mrs. Bell's blank look gave way to one of scarlet comprehension—"oh, my dear, it was nothing. Yes, you paid her quite enough, but she's prudent, and Scotch, too, and diphtheria's a risky thing to nurse. Oh, I am so ashamed of myself. What was I thinking of? But she wouldn't have done it for anybody else but me, my dear. And you had to have the very best nurse that could be got, you know, for it was touch and go with you for days."

Mrs. Bell looked at her with glistening eyes. "And you let us think—"

"My dear, never mind what I let you think."

"Oh, but I just feel so overwhelmed that I don't know what to do," said

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Mrs. Bell, so mournfully that Mrs. Bradney laughed.

"Well, you might give me Laurie for one thing," she said, lightly. "I'm not going to let him come in to see you to-day, for after he came back the last time he mourned for his mother, as Mrs. McAlpine would say. And he's coming home anyway on Friday."

As they sat at dinner that day Laurie suddenly said:

"You never taught me any script of texture last week, Auntie Rell." His tone was clearly reproachful. "And it was in the Gospel of George, too."

"That was too bad. Do all the little boys and girls learn one, Laurie?"

"Yes. And I didn't have any. And I was so 'shamed of myself, Auntie Rell. So I just said 'Little Jack Horner' instead."

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"Oh, Laurie Bell! Think of your poor mother," groaned Mrs. Bradney.

"Did you know that this was Abraham's birthday?" he asked, after he had hurried an alarming amount of food into himself.

"You mean Abraham Lincoln, Laurie."

"Yes, Auntie Rell. That's what teacher said, too. But he didn't kill Isaac after all. He undid him and let him go free, because he was black."

Mrs. Bradney wrestled with this subject for some time, but quite unsuccessfully, for Laurie, having once received it into his mind that Abraham Patriarch and Abraham Lincoln were one and the same person, saw no reason for lightly parting with his faith. Miss Walker's delicately spun analogies had been sown upon too eager ground, apparently.

"But didn't you think it was a very

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drizzly sermon this morning, Auntie Rell?"

"Drizzly? I don't know what you mean by that, Laurie."

"You don't? Why, doesn't that word mean anything to you, Auntie Rell? Listen now! Drizzly! A driz—z—z—ly sermon!"

"Well, yes, Laurie; I really believe it means a good deal," said Mrs. Bradney, laughing. "In fact, in this case it strikes me as an absolutely inspired description."

"You know there was a nigger sat behind us, Auntie Rell. He smelt niggerish."

"Oh, but Laurie, I don't think he was a colored man at all, and besides, you couldn't smell him over five pews."

"Not smell him over five pews, Auntie Rell? Why, I could smell that niggerish smell a mile."

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That afternoon Mrs. Bradney was kept hard at work reading the "Pilgrim's Progress." She did not like it; she thought it very gory, but Laurie smacked his lips over its most sanguinary details with all the zest of a prize-fighter. Then she tried the "Story of the Bible" for a change, and it amazed her to see how unerringly the child caught the moral of its ancient histories, and what odd fancies of his own he wove among them.

"Do you know why the Israelites were called that, Auntie Rell?"

"No."

"Well, it was because they loved God and had the light, but the Midianites and the Canaanites and the Ammonites were called nights because they were the heathen that sat in darkness, Auntie Rell."

Of course the child was a care and an anxiety to her, and he upset all her

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stated ways of living, and she wondered sometimes why she had undertaken the charge of him at all; but, as she often said to Vandelia, "he was such a good child," and that sufficed for an excuse, which did not hoodwink Vandelia in the least, however. But his going back to his mother was something of which she did not encourage herself to think.

The next day, however, he was so really naughty that Mrs. Bradney went away to her room at last with an air of offended majesty, which worried Laurie so much that he was determined she should never suspect it. In a few minutes she heard his heavy little feet tumbling up the stairs after her. He flung open the door and showed himself, red and stamping.

"You're a bad girl, Auntie Rell," he said, vehemently — "a very bad girl"; and then he quickly took the

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key out of her door, and locked it on the other side.

For a moment Mrs. Bradney stared at the door in blank amazement at this audacity. Then she began to laugh silently, and the more she thought about it the more she laughed.

"Now will you be good?" came in peremptory demand from the other side of the door. But there was no response, and after he had asked the question a great many times Laurie at last unlocked the door, impelled thereto by a variety of emotions. It had even occurred to him that Mrs. Bradney might be dead. So that when he discovered her, calm and severe as before, he felt himself freshly insulted.

"Now are you going to be good?" he stormed, more imperiously than before. "Because if you're not, I shall have to lock you up again."

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But suddenly his mood changed, and without a hint of warning he threw himself towards her, crying out:

"Oh, Auntie Rell, I so misabul, I so misabul!"

She gathered him tenderly into her arms, and after a while they talked about it, and the sun shone again in Laurie's darkened little heart. But Mrs. Bradney could not forget the troubled cry. She knew, too, what it meant to be so "misabul."

After the child had spent his soul in the joys of contrition, he studied Mrs. Bradney for a time in silence. At last he said with an air of delicate restraint: "Auntie Rell, there's something I must talk to you about. When Mrs. McAlpine comes to see you I wish you wouldn't send me out of the room to see Vandelia, 'specially when you're going to talk about things you don't want me to hear. Because, you know,

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there's nothing I want to hear so badly as what you don't want me to hear, of course."

Mrs. Bradney leaned back in her chair and began to laugh.

"Well, Laurie, I think a great many people have felt just as you do, but I must say I never heard anybody so refreshingly frank about it. But there isn't anybody here now, so you won't miss anything, and you had better run out and find Brazil, for I know he has something in the barn he wants to show you."

A few moments later he rushed screaming into the kitchen.

"Why, Vandelia, there's a new kind of a dog out there. And it's lying down just so close to Snowfoot."

After that he made a trip to the barn about every third minute for the rest of the day.

"But Brazil says it isn't any sort of

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a dog at all," he announced at last. "He says it's a calf, and that it belongs to Snowfoot. But what is a calf, Vandelia?"

"Same thing as a full-grown man lots of times," said Vandelia, grimly; "just about every time, in fact, but this particular calf will be a cow one of these days, child."

"Then I hope it'll be a black one," said Laurie, fervently. "Black cows must give black milk, don't they, Vandelia?"

"Well, I've seem some milk that looked mighty like it was raised by a black cow, but I don't know as any of 'em advertise themselves as a specialty on that line, Laurie."

"Frank, Frank, turned a crank,
His mother came out and gave him a spank,"

sang the child gaily. He was in the ecstasy of happiness which only the

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little one who has been naughty and been forgiven knows anything about.

"Hunh! You don't know what spank means," said Vandelia, eying him severely. "Else you'd never have been such a tormenting, little, good-for-nothing, useless shape of an aggravating boy as you've been this day."

"Yes, I do know," contended Laurie. "It means, 'Frank, don't you turn that crank any more.'"

"Well, I'm beat," said Vandelia, and gave him a cooky to prove it.

CHAPTER X

"This is the joyfulest day of my life, Auntie Rell. Know why? Why, 'cause I'm going back to my own dear mamma."

Laurie was sitting up in his crib, a little, pale blue night-gowned figure, hugging itself in a passion of prospective ecstasy, his sweet face pink and eager, his eyes deep with far-sighted yearning for his mother.

But his words were like stabs to Mrs. Bradney. After breakfast he flew hither and yon, in breathless farewell to everything. He found it hard to part with Snowfoot, but he assured the calf that if it was good it should behold him again. He packed and repacked his toys as solicitously as if

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they were bound for the remotest planet, and he finally capped the morning's disjointed performances by a mood of the tenderest relenting, in which he commissioned Vandelia to tell Mary Pinch that most likely he would marry her, as perhaps if they lived together long enough their hair would come to be the same color.

"Of course, she's older than I am, Vandelia, but I shan't mind that, for you see she'd be able to take such good care of me, then, when I'm a man."

"Land of Goshen!" exclaimed Vandelia. "If that ain't for all the world like all the rest of the men. But it strikes me you're finding out pretty early what a triflin' thing a man is without a woman to hold him up."

Mrs. Bradney drove him home, but she did not go in with him.

"I suppose there will be a regular

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scene when he gets back to his mother," she thought, irritably.

It did not occur to her that she was jealous. And so Laurie burst in alone upon Mrs. Bell like a whirling dervish.

"Oh, mamma, mamma! how I wish you and I had been born on the same day!" he exclaimed, ecstatically, as soon as he could find his voice. "Then we could have spent all our lives just loving each other all the time. And where's papa? Does he know I've got two cats? You'll just love Circe, mamma. She's such a manly cat, only I don't think a girl cat looks nice with so many whiskers. But they're both all full of bones inside, plain bones, and round bones, and all shapes of clapper bones."

"Clapper bones, Laurie?"

"Why, yes. Don't you know, mamma? Auntie Rell does. You

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get them out of the roast sometimes, only the man in the store calls them ribs. And you put them between your fingers, like this, and then they make—oh, a lovely noise!”

Laurie looked poetic.

“Esau and Circe gave a bone party in the back yard yesterday. Not their own bones, you know, mamma. The chicken-we-had-for-dinner’s bones. I think about a hundred cats came. But Auntie Rell’s a heathen. Did you know it?”

“Oh, Laurie, dear! You mustn’t say such things.

“Oh, but she is, mamma. She doesn’t say her prayers, because I watched to see. And I talked to her about that. And she said she would. She promised.”

Then Mrs. Bell said nothing. It seemed safer merely to think.

After Laurie was gone Vandelia

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wandered aimlessly about the silent rooms, picking up the last remnants of his litter, about which she had so often scolded him. But when she had restored everything to its immaculate formality again she looked about her angrily.

"It ain't looked like this once since he came," she muttered. "Such a tormentin', restless, little, uprootin' racket of a chap I never came across."

She clattered noisily upstairs, the house suddenly struck her as so hopelessly still. Then she sat down to sew, "in peace." But the work was fine and the afternoon growing dull, and presently she threw it down impatiently and clasped her idle hands over her knee.

A smile gathered about her stiff lips.

"He certainly is the cutest child," she whispered, grudgingly.

But she shook this mood off sharply.

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"Come!" she said, briskly. "Guess I'll make some scones for supper."

She bustled down to the kitchen, as if in great stress of preparation, but after she had surrounded herself with the necessary things she pushed them from her in sudden impatience.

"Yes, she'll eat one scone—perhaps two, only she never does. And I'll eat two. And here's all this fuss and fire to bake four scones!" She shook her fist at the wall. "I tell you I ain't goin' to do it." She slapped the things back into their places. "Seems somehow just as if there'd been a funeral in the house."

That was what Mrs. Bradney thought as Brazil drove her in lonely state back to the house on the hill. She shivered as she went in, and instead of going upstairs at once she sat down in the warm dining-room, and pulled vaguely at her bonnet

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strings. The room was growing gray and dim; this had been Laurie's tired time, when he demanded "cuddling" and a gory tale. She remembered now with an odd little pang her utter surprise the first time he had audaciously settled himself in her elegant black silk lap, and calmly remarked: "Now begin. Because if you don't, the oh-dearing time will begin, and that's awful."

"But begin what? And what is the oh-dearing time?" she had inquired in bewilderment.

"Why, it's when you go like this all the time, Auntie Rell: 'Oh, dear! What can I do now? Oh, dear! I wish somebody would read to me! Oh, dear!' Like that—don't you see, Auntie Rell? Mamma says it makes her crazy."

"Well, but what shall I begin?" inquired Mrs. Bradney, helplessly.

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Stories had never been much in her line.

"Oh, I like the story of Ulysses best, but perhaps you don't know much about that?"

"I'm afraid I've forgotten some," said Mrs. Bradney, anxiously.

"Well, Daniel in the lions' den's a good one, only you've got to make the lions roar until you're awful hoarse, Auntie Rell."

How ridiculous she had felt that evening, taking her first lesson in story-telling from a little child, and how lonely she felt now! She was still sitting there, dreaming, when Vandelia came in to set the supper-table.

"Well, he's gone," she said at last, planting herself in front of Mrs. Bradney; "and it's a good thing, too, isn't it?"

Mrs. Bradney looked at her in dignified surprise.

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"You're glad, aren't you?" persisted Vandelia, recklessly. "Now we'll have peace and quiet in this great big house, and lots of room to spread ourselves."

"Vandelia, what is the matter with you?"

Vandelia eyed her unflinchingly.

"I heard something just now."

Mrs. Bradney rose instantly and went upstairs.

But what had Vandelia heard? The question lay deep in her heart; the answer lay there, too.

The next day she went down to inquire for Mrs. Bell and Laurie. At least she admitted no other errand to herself.

When she came home Vandelia hovered about her, eager-eyed, but Mrs. Bradney gave no sign. She toiled through the long evening over some plain hemming, which bore more

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resemblance to a severe attack of hieroglyphics than anything else, but she was bound to keep up appearances, especially to herself. She had a desperate feeling that she must avoid admitting to herself what she was really all the time thinking of.

But hours later, long after all the lights were out, and when the loneliness about her was vibrant with the dark terrors of the night she sat up still, grappling with the agony which sank her soul in the unsounded deeps of despair.

As the wind without rose from a whistling wail into the wild sweep of a hurricane, she cruelly rehearsed again and again the few faltering words in which Mrs. Bell had told her the news about Hilary.

"She is dreadfully ill. They do not know—"

Ah! her mother's heart had beaten

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down all the barriers about it then. At that moment her only thought had been, how to reach her child soonest. And then— "This morning they telegraphed for Mrs. Hessemer. She had just ten minutes to catch the express."

Even now, alone in the darkness, she cowered beneath the remembrance of the words which had cankered her tenderest impulses to the quivering core of them. Mrs. Hessemer with Hilary! In the place which was hers alone! The blood flew in scorching streaks through her veins at the thought of it.

She was not a superstitious woman, but there came a time in that dark night of storm and destruction when, above the screaming fury of the wind, she heard Hilary's voice in unending entreaty, "Mother, mother, come!" They were the last words of the child's letter—that pathetic, pleading letter

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which had come to her weeks before, but now they were instinct with life and terror for her. There! She heard the cry again. It was Hilary. The child was dying, and she had not gone to her.

She sank down, helpless and moaning, upon her knees, only to start up again at a terrific crash outside in the whirling nightmare of the storm. She could bear it alone no longer, and throwing open her door she hurried down the long corridor, past the besieging echoes of empty rooms, until she reached Vandelia's quarters.

"Vandelia! Vandelia!"

"Yes, ma'am," cried Vandelia, wakefully. "My! But I'm real glad to see you. Come in," she added, with effusive hospitality. "My! I've been lying here near scared into fits. I don't suppose there's a tree left standing on this place."

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Mrs. Bradney sat down quite calmly. Now that she was within sound of a human voice the frantic terror which had possessed her gave way to reason, and she was at once her usual controlled self again, and her suffering just the cold agony of despair—not a near dread of those mysterious forces which had assailed her like myriad-tongued demons in the lonely darkness.

"Yes, Vandelia. I was afraid you would be frightened," she said, considerably.

But Vandelia was not deceived. She knew very well what had brought Mrs. Bradney to her door that night.

"Give in? No, she'll never give in. She ain't built that way, and it's too late to tear up her foundations now. It'll take more than a thunder-storm to move her. It'll require a whole earthquake right under her two feet."

But Hilary did not die. She got

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better, very slowly, as Mrs. Bell almost unwillingly admitted to Mrs. Bradney. "But no, Douglas! I won't tell her one thing about that baby. She's just dying to know something. But I won't. No, I won't!"

Which defiant determination doubtless led to her saying the very next day to Mrs. Bradney:

"I think he must be the breathing image of his mother, from all I hear."

"His mother? He? Who?" faltered Mrs. Bradney, startled into unwitting speech by a remark far more disconcerting to her than the unannounced appearance of a mad dog in that peaceful parlor could possibly have been.

"Why, Hilary's baby, of course!" exclaimed Mrs. Bell, hardily. "I declare the little lords of creation are having it all their own way just now. Mrs. Todd has a little boy, and so has Mrs. Balkema."

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And with that she digressed cruelly into the merest trivialities of current gossip, all the time shrewdly conscious of the smothered passion she had so skillfully fired beneath that cold, calm glacier.

Hilary's baby! Hilary's little boy! A fair blue-eyed darling tugging at her heart-strings day after day with pink, dimpled fists.

But no!

When, in time, Hugo's mother returned, it seemed the most natural thing in the world for Mrs. Bell to call on the gentle old lady, and listen to her pretty stories about the most wonderful baby who had ever lived.

"He's the picture of mine Hugo," she said, proudly. "But then his mother—she is one luffy young maiden."

It was now that Mrs. Bell became a diplomat indeed. For she contrived

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in the most glaringly innocent way to let Mrs. Bradney know that she possessed mines of information about that baby, and gradually, in response to the fierce craving which she divined in the proud, silent mother she fell into the habit of retailing to her every little scrap of knowledge she had gathered.

"I just experimented this afternoon, Douglas," she said one night to her husband. "I talked of nothing but Hilary and the baby. I told her exactly how all his clothes are made, even down to how many tucks his best dress has, and she just sat there, never saying one word until I simply had to stop from sheer lack of imagination. If I could have kept on, she'd be here still."

"And yet she never asks anything about Mrs. Hessemer herself?"

"No, not a thing. Somehow, it

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seems to me she can't. She's just dying to see Hilary and the baby, but a kind of paralysis has come over her. Oh, yes, you may laugh, but I tell you she has really lost the power to will herself to do what she wants to do more than anything else in the world."

A few days after this, as Mrs. Bradney and Mrs. Bell were sitting out on the veranda at Hill House, Mrs. Bell said suddenly:

"It's too bad that Hilary's feeling so miserable again, isn't it? You see that baby's such a great, strong thing, and will frolic by night as well as by day, and she's got such a wretched girl, so what can you expect? I suppose she really needs a change of air. Oh, how lovely and fresh it is up here!"

The air was sweet with the prodigal perfume of spring blossoms, and throbbing with the exultant color of tulips flaunting in red and yellow riot over

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the dull brown earth. Snowy clusters of guelder roses starred the mingled tints of the leaf-green trees, and lilacs shook their scented sprays at every whispering breeze. Broad seed-sown acres and daisied meadow, with here and there an orchard pink and white with harvest promise, made exquisitely fair the face of this furrowed field of time. Far away, cresting the ragged ridge of the hilltop, three lonely pines spiked with their slender spires the blue eternity above them.

"I tell you," cried Mrs. Bell, impulsively, "this is the kind of thing that Hilary needs." A quiver passed over Mrs. Bradney's face. How old and worn she looked!

"If she were anybody else, she would be ill," thought Mrs. Bell, sagely, as she watched her. And then a sudden inspiring thought came to the little woman. It pursued her as she

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tripped down the hill with Laurie trotting beside her, with a mouth full of "whats" and "whys," to which, for once, she paid no heed.

When she reached home she broke riotously into the study.

"Oh, Douglas! I'm going to write to her. She must come home—now, at once. Without asking, you know. She must just write and say she's coming. Mrs. Bradney will die. That's simply going to be the end of it if she doesn't."

Mr. Bell looked up slowly from his half-written sermon.

"What? Who? Which? When? She will and she won't. She'll be dead if she does, and she'll be dead if she don't! Now, Betty—"

"Oh, yes, you dear old mazy mind! I suppose you don't know yet whether it's Peter or Paul or James or John I'm talking about. But that doesn't

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matter. That letter's going to-night, anyway."

It went. Mr. Bell held his breath while he read it, and secretly wondered how much longer they were likely to be permitted to remain in Sand Harbor if his wife would insist upon manipulating the personal affairs of the parishioners in this wise.

"Doesn't it seem to you, Betty," he ventured mildly, "that it reads rather as if the invitation came directly from Mrs. Bradney?"

"Why, of course it does," rejoined his wife, heartily. "That's just the beauty of it. You don't suppose Mrs. Hessemer would come home if she suspected that I had concocted the whole scheme myself, do you?"

"Isn't it a little—risky?"

"Risky? Well, I should just think so, Douglas Bell. It's magnificently risky. It's like jumping from the top

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of the clock-tower bang into a basket of eggs, with the distinct understanding that you're not to break any. No, dear; of course a man couldn't do that, but a woman—well, you'll see."

The letter was certainly a marvel of strategy. It described Hill House, how beautiful the garden was looking, how lonely Mrs. Bradney was, and how delicate her health was this year; in the middle of it nestled a remark of Vandelia's which brought the tears in a quick rush to Hilary's eyes, and it ended by saying: "Don't write your mother a letter. That isn't what she wants. Just send one line with the day and the train, and come at once."

Hilary took the letter to her husband, and laid her cheek against his while he read it. When he had finished he pushed her away from him and looked at her. Her eyes were

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bright; there was a lovely color in her thin face.

"Why, my darling, you're better already," he exclaimed.

"But you," she persisted. "I couldn't leave you." Her lips touched his hair.

"Of course you couldn't. But if we were both away, that would seem different, wouldn't it? You know, last week when they begged me to undertake that geological survey up North—such a big chance for me, dear—I couldn't see how I could go just now, for I couldn't take you and the baby on such a rough trip, and I couldn't leave you here alone. And mother is too old now to be kept on the go between here and Sand Harbor. So I just made up my mind not to say anything to you about it, but now you see I could go, and easily come for you on my way back, perhaps."

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They talked about it for a long time, but at last it was settled, and Hilary said with a happy sigh:

"Of course, Hugo, this letter is just as much mother's as if she had written it herself. Mrs. Bell doesn't say so, but I can tell. Why, she wouldn't dare to write that letter if mother hadn't virtually asked her to. Mother's just too proud to do it herself. That's all. But do you think I mind that?"

Three days later, as Vandelia was busily ironing in the big, old-fashioned kitchen, with its wide windows open to the fairy showers of the blossom-burdened trees, Mrs. Bradney came in with a strangely ceremonious air, which was peculiarly enhanced by the light in her eyes and the trembling of her lips.

"Vandelia, I expect Mrs. Hessemmer and the baby about four o'clock tomorrow afternoon. I have been very

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anxious for her to come for some time, and it just happens that she can leave home most conveniently now."

Vandelia sat down in a chair with the flatiron in her lap. It burnt a brown triangle in her apron, and then she got up and plumped it down on the table with its nice new oilcloth. Then she looked out of the window, and furtively wiped her useful if not strictly ornamental nose. She afterwards admitted that it was the only time in her life when she had known what it was to feel "real grovelling" pious."

By the middle of the next morning Hill House had taken on a festival air, such as it had never worn before. For Mrs. Bell had casually dropped in, and learning, to her great surprise, that they were expecting Mrs. Hessemer, she had kindly offered her services in the preparations through which Mrs.

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Bradney and Vandelia were hurrying. She filled the rooms with spring flowers, and coaxed Brazil's finest plants away from him to brighten up dull corners.

"Well, you have had to hurry, with such a short notice," she said, sympathetically, to Vandelia.

"Hurry! I should say so. There's been so many different things to do all at once that I feel as if I'd been driven from Dan to Beersheba ever since four this morning. 'Vandelia, we must have your rusks for supper. There's nothing Mrs. Hessemer used to like better.' And, 'Vandelia, are you sure the carpet in the south room was up in the spring?' 'Oh, Vandelia, I wish we'd sent those curtains to the laundry this morning. They could have had them back in time, under the circumstances.' It's just been like that all the time. But do you think I mind?"

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added Vandelia, significantly. "She hasn't looked like she does to-day, not for years."

A little later in the morning Vandelia and Laurie collided violently in one of the upstairs corridors as he was carrying some splendid ox-eyed daisies to Mrs. Hessemer's room.

"Well, Vandelia," he remarked between sobs, as he feelingly rubbed the rising bump on his head, "I'd just like to know which way you thought you were going then."

"Which way, child?"

"Yes; to Dan or Beersheba, of course," he retorted in highly injured tones.

At last, when they could all think of nothing more to do, they studied the time-table over and over again.

"She'll get to the Junction at two," said Vandelia. "My! But she'll be tired! And all that bother there,

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changing, with that great baby in her arms, too."

Mrs. Bell looked up quickly.

"Why, there's a train from here to the Junction this morning. You'd just have time to catch it, Mrs. Bradney, and then you could help her through the very worst part of her journey."

And so, while they all talked at once, Mrs. Bell buttoned on her shoes, while Vandelia tied on her bonnet, and Laurie tucked unheeded a bunch of dandelions into her dress.

"Auntie Rell, do you know what I think?" he said, as he surveyed her contentedly. "I think you look as if you had a kiss in your heart for everybody this morning."

"So I have, child," she said, brokenly, as she bent over him, and then she was gone.

But later, as she paced restlessly up

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and down the Junction platform, her mind kept nervously returning to the cruel night when she had stolen her last look at the child who had once loved only her.

But when the longed-for train swept into sight around the curve, she remembered only that the moment of her yearning hopes had come when she should welcome that child home to her heart once more.

"Why, mother!"

"There, there, Hilary! Child, you'll wake him! Wait, give him to me. You aren't fit to hold him. Besides, you've crumpled his ear inside his bonnet. You must never do that. It would soon spoil their shape."

"But, mother—"

"Why, of course, child. Did you think I was going to let you worry through all this alone, after such a journey with a great boy like this?"

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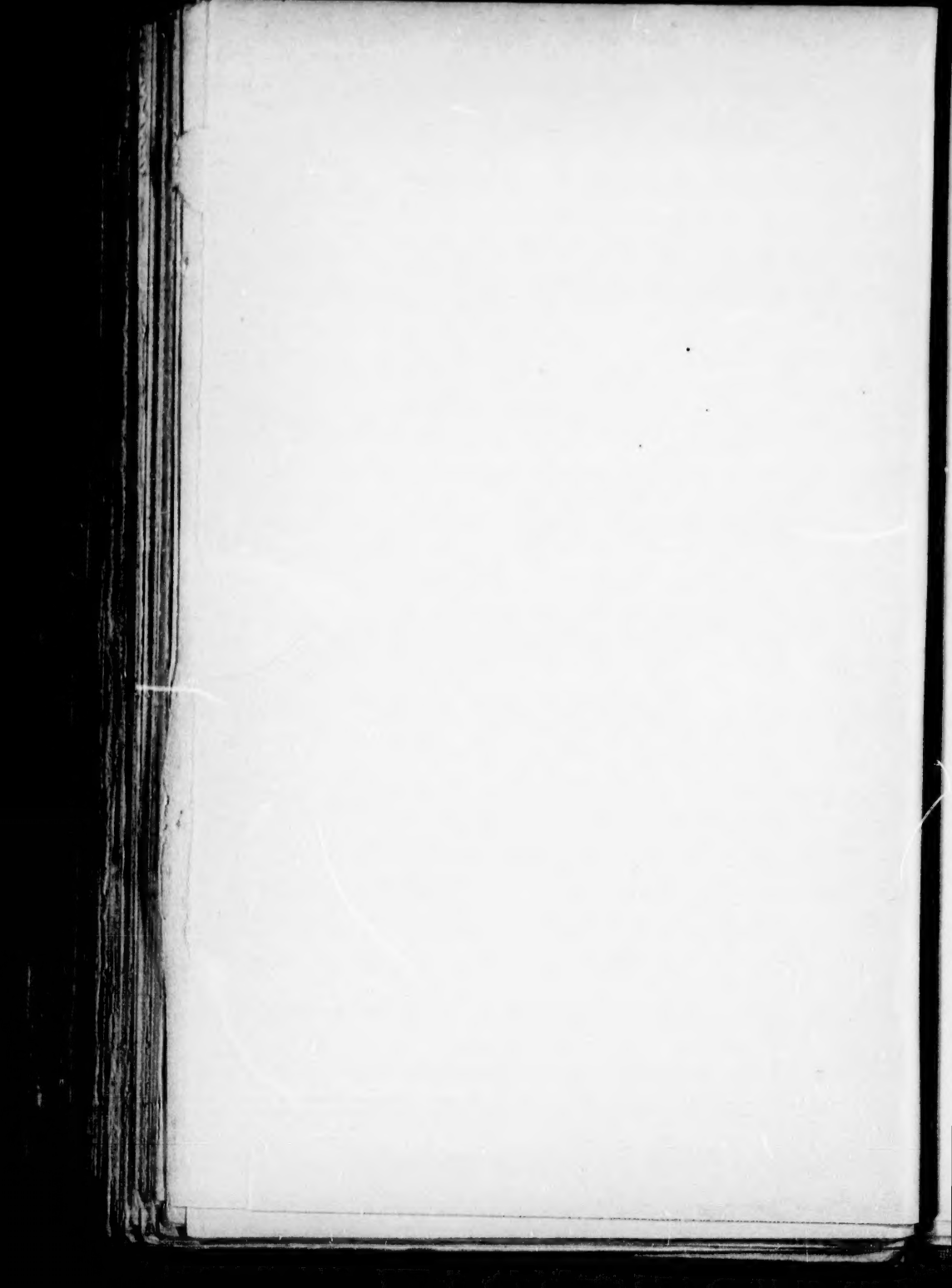
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She feasted her eyes on him for a
moment. Then she said, proudly:

"But he's every inch a Bradney."
And Hilary only laughed.



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